"BUT THE FRUIT OF THE SPIRIT IS LOVE...."
Galatians 5:22

Pilgrim Congregational Church, Duluth — September 15, 1974

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I find that many people in Duluth, especially of the older generation, have been reading a book called, The Will of Magda Townsend. The reason for this local interest is obvious. The novel is a thinly veiled autobiography of the Duluth native, Margaret Banning. Once you realize that Zenith City is really Duluth, it is not hard to identify Superior Street, the Brule River or the intersection of Kent Road, Irving Place, East 6th Street and Twenty-fourth Avenue East. But I am sure that many older Duluth people find certain characters more interesting than the geography. For in the book they renew their acquaintance with people under assumed names whom they once knew or knew about.

Yet the most attractive character in the book, I think, is not a Duluthian at all. He is Magda's Uncle Joe, a physician in Rochester, New York. As a tense, anemic and uncertain girl of sixteen Magda travels to visit her uncle and aunt. She calls this visit her "year of grace," partly because during that time she becomes a communicant in the Roman Catholic Church. But it is clear that the most powerful means of grace is Uncle Joe whose loving sensitivity opens up in the young girl her own potential for achievement, for love and for faith.

The liberating power of human love is the stuff from which most good stories are made, both in fiction and in reality. Yet we know - or we ought to know - that love too has its corruptions. The sad affair of Mrs. Fidget that I read to you this morning is a case in point. In his book, The Four Loves, the late C. S. Lewis draws a distinction between what he calls, "need love" and "gift love." He does not deny the indispensable place of need love in human life. Rather he wishes to point out that the highest love is that which longs to be of service to others while claiming nothing for itself. Yet he is forced to reflect that in the complexities of human life this distinction is hard to apply. For in people like Mrs. Fidget, gift-love arises from a sick need both to give and to be needed.

Love has its corruptions. It may be unduly possessive. It may be imperious, seeking to control the lives of others. It may be sentimental, a sort of basking in a pleasant feeling of love that is not accompanied by much sense of responsibility. We have all heard the judgment passed, sometimes justly, that so and so was really in love with love. Love may become an excuse for unloving behavior. People may use their love for one person to justify their neglect or betrayal of other persons. There is a profound sense in which love is the ultimate door to understanding another. Yet there is also truth in the proverb, "Love is blind."

In our day it is commonplace to insist that love is the answer to all of life's problems. It is almost unthinkable that anyone should challenge this universal dogma of our culture. I dare not challenge it myself, for I believe that in a deep sense it is at least partly true. But it is also true that this dogma has a way of throwing up a smoke screen around a good many tough human issues. Some students of Christian ethics are fond of quoting a saying attributed to St. Augustine, "Love God and do as you

please." Unfortunately that saying is easily translated in practice into the dictum: "If you enjoy a glowing sensation, anything goes."

There are two reasons why as Christians we cannot accept the popular dogma about love uncritically. One reason is that in our language the word "love" covers a great deal of territory. It is a far cry from "I love custard pie" to "God so loved the world"; from "love" among the playboy playmates to "love" described in 1st Corinthians.

Another reason why we need to be discriminating in our talk about love is that even the highest forms of love may be perverted. Only God's love is pure and unadulterated. That is why, I think the wise and humble Christian never relies on his love alone. We need some other qualities of character like the fruit of the spirit called, "self-control," to ensure that our behavior is consistent with love.

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Let us take warning then at our capacity to corrupt love. But having done that let us go on to confess with joy that love is what the New Testament is all about. The gospel message about Jesus is simply this: Jesus Christ was the embodiment of divine love in a human life.

The message about the Holy Spirit is that this same love embodied in Christ continues to pour down into the hearts of Jesus' disciples.

Finally, the message about Christian living is that having received God's love through him, Jesus' disciples are energized and guided by that love in all their relationships.

Now I have already implied that this love which the New Testament writers speak about is a very special kind of love. They co-opted a particular Greek word for it, the word agape. If I had my way, we would make that word part of our Christian English, and we would ask our Bible translators to retain agape in all the appropriate passages. For example, they would translate, "faith, hope and agape, these three..." and "Greater agape has no man than this...that he lay down his life for his friends" and "The fruit of the Spirit is agape..."

How might we describe agape? The first thing we can say about it is that it is free. It comes no strings attached. Agape doesn't say, "I will love you if you do such and such for me in return." Agape says, "I love you period." Agape comes free of self-seeking conditions.

Agape also comes free of moral obstacles. Paul said in another place, "While we were yet sinners Christ died for us." That's the way agape came in Jesus. That is the way it must come in us.

Toyohiko Kagawa said:

"God has provided most wonderful laws of love. First there is instinctive or physical love...second there is moral love: a love for the goodness in men...but these are not enough. Having moral love only, we scorn sinners, we despise prostitutes, gamblers and publicans. Therefore, we need a third and super-moral love, for we must love the corrupt sinner even as God does."

Agape is this "super-moral" love. It is given freely despite the things we disapprove. That does not mean, of course, that in order to love in this way we must approve of prostitution and graft. That would be an immoral love. But we know that if God waited until there was nothing wrong with us to show his love, there would be no hope for us at all. Likewise, there would be no hope for human affairs if everyone waited to love until there was nothing wrong with anyone else. Agape is love unbound by taste or scruple. It is free.

This freedom leads us to a second observation about Christian love. It is inclusive. Some unknown wit remarked that it is good for cats and dogs to be brought up together because "it broadens their minds so." Christian love is broadening too. It takes in everybody. Perhaps the most astonishing feature of the early church to the world outside lay right here. Jew and Gentile, freeman and slave, men and women, people of all classes and nationalities came together. "We are all one in Christ," they said. That was an unprecedented assertion,

Candor requires that we acknowledge that as time went on the church frequently lost this inclusive character. It let itself be fragmented in ways that reflected the fragmentation of society. Congregations, denominations and special communities gathered on the basis of class, nationality and race. Whenever this happens to the church its mission as the servant of agape is compromised. And the outside world rightly judges it to be a phony and plastic institution.

It is precisely at the point where ordinary love halts at the barriers that agape is called into action. In his book The Autobiography of Prayer, Albert Day tells the story of a charitable black woman in the south. A wealthy neighbor decides to reward the woman for her service to the poor and needy by building her a house. No sooner does the woman move into this new home than she invites to live with her the most disreputable woman in town. The rich benefactor is offended that his noblesse oblige should be put to such use. He says to the woman whom he had favored:

"How could you have invited that creature into your pretty new home."

The woman replied simply: "Jesus would."

Jesus would and Jesus did. Jesus also brought home for us the inclusive thrust of agape in his parable of the Good Samaritan. Only to meet the challenge of that parable it is necessary for us to change the characters to fit the times. So long as the story is about a Jewish priest, a Levite and a Samaritan, it is easy for people like us to read it in a purely sentimental way. But revise the cast of characters to something like a football coach, a quarterback and an American army deserter from Canada and you begin to feel the cutting edge to agape that Jesus meant us to feel.

Thirdly, agape is sacrificial. It is love that gives. Walter Judd, who spoke in this room in times past, said that his missionary experience taught him that while "the way of love always works...the way of love is the way of the cross." He said that if Jesus could not win people for the kingdom without sacrifice, it is foolish to think we can.

Every variety of love that is genuine love involves an element of sacrifice. The confused martyrdom of the Mrs. Fidgets need not obscure this fact.

True motherhood means giving up - giving up time, giving up interests, giving up sleep, giving up recreation, giving up money, giving up peace of mind. Maybe that's one reason why motherhood seems to be growing less popular. So it is too with fatherhood, or marital love, or friendship, or patriotism or those who sing "I love thy church, O God." The proof of the pudding of love is in the readiness to sacrifice.

Fourthly, agape, Christian love, is contagious. You can't manufacture it; you have to catch it. The Christian movement began and spread around the world by the sheer contagion of love.

This is only another way of affirming what has become a truism of our time. You have to receive love in order to give love. Students of human nature have supported that truism by scientific experiment and analysis. We must beware of thinking in terms of a simple formula here. Some children who are horribly neglected and abused grow up to be remarkably loving persons. Some people on whom love seems to be showered not only well but wisely, turn out just the opposite. But I suppose there is no reason for doubting the general principle that love must be received in order for it to be shared.

Now this takes us to the very nub of the Gospel. Agape, writes Paul, is a fruit of the Spirit. It is not just a quality that we can develop in ourselves the way we can develop big muscles by lifting weights. This very special way of loving comes by exposure to love from beyond ourselves.

I suspect that in years past when some of you were members of a confirmation class or a church youth group, you were given a little book called, The Greatest Thing in the World. This was actually a printed sermon by the 19th century Scot, Henry Drummond. After describing Christian love at much greater length than 20th century American preachers are permitted to do, Drummond asks:

> "How are we to learn to love?...We brace our wills to secure it. We try to copy those who have it. We lay down rules about it. We watch. We pray. But these things alone will not bring love into our nature. Love is an effect. And only as we fulfill the right condition can we have the effect produced. Shall I tell you what the cause is?"

Then by way of answer, Henry Drummond refers us to the First Epistle of John, fourth chapter, nineteenth verse.

> "We love because he first loved us."

You see, that is what we need to believe with all our heart and strength, that there is a divine love given to us first, a love that comes to us freely and inclusively and sacrificially and which can enable us to love by the power of its own contagion. The love of God does come to us in Christ, showing us what agape really means. That same love is offered to each one of us individually, here and now, through the divine spirit at work within us. Such love can be ours, not to own or to hoard, but to experience and to share. It is offered to us now as it was offered to those first disciples. And when we expose ourselves to it, it is indeed, "the greatest thing in the world."