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## The Breadth and Depth of Love

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**A sermon by Canon Wallace Marsh**

*"This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you."*

Today's gospel passage is one of the suggested wedding readings in The Book of Common Prayer. I have spent many a Saturday thinking about it this text and yesterday was no exception. I was excited about preaching this text on Sunday morning instead of Saturday Night (in the context of marriage). And then, the events of this past week unfolded.

On Tuesday, North Carolina voted on an Amendment to their state constitution banning gay marriage. On Wednesday, President Obama offered his position supporting gay marriage. The rest of the week "marriage" seemed to dominate the news.

As I prepared this sermon I asked myself, "Do I dare comment on this week's political conversation from the pulpit of St. Philip's?" My gut reaction ""Absolutely Not! I asked myself a second question: "Is it possible to preach on this famous wedding passage without referencing the conversations on marriage that have been taking place all week?" My gut reaction ""Absolutely Not! So I asked myself a third question, "How in the world am I going to work Mother's Day into this sermon?"

As I began to ponder all these things in my heart, I was reminded of the final lecture in one of my theology classes at Yale Divinity School. Renowned theologian, Dr. Miroslav Volf, said your job as a Christian pastor and theologian isn't to make people's choices and decisions for them; your job is to help them make "theological distinctions."

Today's epistle and gospel readings are about love, but there are important *theological distinctions* to be made when we talk about love. The Greeks knew this well that is why they had different words for love"" *agape* (self-giving), *eros* (sexual), and *philia* (friendly), to name a few. When our society talks about love, as we have been doing this week, I believe we are (consciously or unconsciously) thinking *eros* (sexual love) and that hinders our ability to see the breadth and depth of love.

That is a bold statement to make about society so let me ground it in something factual. Since March 25, the top three purchased books (over 3 million copies) are *Fifty Shades of Grey*, *Fifty Shades Darker*, *Fifty Shades Freed*. The books are sexually graphic and are being marketed as an "erotic love trilogy." *EROS!*

Eros only appears in scripture a few times, yet we as a culture are obsessed with it! We live in it and are dominated by it, and it seems to keep us from making "distinctions" when it comes to love!

The passages before us today use *philia* (friendship) and *agape* (self-giving) for love. 1 John notes that *agape* resembles the love between a parent and child. *Agape* is something that does not come easy. It is something we have to live into with God's grace.

Last weekend, my sister (Margaret) and brother-in-law Zach came to visit. They brought with them my 4 year-old nephew

and 2 year-old niece. My little sister is a great mother, but she is still (and will always be) my annoying little sister. On Sunday evening, as I was going through the house emptying the trash I walked into the guest bathroom and the trashcan was full of diapers!

I looked at that mound of diapers and had two reactions: 1. Why didn't my annoying little sister take that out before she left? 2. "Wow! That is love." That is amazing love. There is a depth and breadth to a mother (and father's) love that I do not understand at this moment in my life.

As a matter of fact, it was recognizing that there was a breadth and depth to love that brought about my own conversion many years ago.

I remember coming to this realization as a 15 year-old at St. Matthew's Episcopal Church, McMinnville, TN. They served soup at Bible Study on Wednesday evenings. My mother said if I wanted dinner on Wednesday Night I needed to go to Bible Study. That is my mother's love! I am thankful she made me attend because it changed my life. The book we were studying was John's gospel and the passage that brought about my conversion was John 21.

If you are not familiar, John 21 is the beautiful Easter passage, where the resurrected Jesus asks Peter three times, "Simon Peter, Son of John do you love me?" Three times Peter responds, "Yes, Lord I love you."

We don't see it in English! We don't see it in English because we fail to make distinctions when it comes to love!

In Greek, Jesus is saying ""Peter, do you love me (*agape*)? The same love in today's passages. Peter responds, "Yes Lord, I love you (*philia*)."  
I love you as a friend. Again a second time ""Peter, do you love me (*agape*)? Peter responds, "Yes Lord, I love you (*philia*)."  
Finally, Jesus asks a third time, but the third question is different. Jesus changes the question ""Peter, do you love me (*philia*)?" Peter responds, "Yes Lord, I love you (*philia*)."

As a 15 year-old boy, I remember being blown away that Jesus changes the question. It was as though Jesus was saying, "Okay Peter, if *philia* is all you got, if *philia* is where you are right now, I'll take it because "I am willing to lay down my life for friends', I'll meet you where you are. But get this Peter""Following me means journeying deeper into love."

Did Peter's love always remain a *philia* love? No, the very next verses (18 and 19) say that when Peter was old, he stretched out his arms and died exactly like Jesus. He gave his life, and the word for that type of love is *agape*, self-giving love.

John 21 has always been at the center of my faith. It is a reminder that there are distinctions, there is a breadth and depth to love. It is a breadth and depth that we are called not only to understand, but to live out""in our love for God and in our love those whom God has placed in our lives.

As we give thanks for the love of our Mother's today, let us give thanks for the breadth and depth of God's love. It is an "abiding love" that meets us where we are and draws us deeper into love.