

There are several movies in my house which we watch repeatedly. We just can't get them out of our system! They are tried and true, and we enjoy them even though we have memorized most of the dialogue. These include, of course, the Christmas movies we have been watching this month. There is, however, one movie that is not attached to a particular season that has been deemed mandatory viewing at least twice a year by my wife Beverly. I'm sure most of you have seen it; *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*. One of the main characters in the film is the patriarch, the father, of a large and raucous Greek family. He is an interesting character, and there are two quirks in his personality that bear mentioning. First, he believes that Windex is a magical fluid. To spray Windex on something is to not only clean it thoroughly but to also restore it, as if the Windex has healing powers. Second, and most important, he believes that everything admirable and worthwhile in the world today has its origins in Greek culture and language. It's a theme that runs throughout the movie.

We may or may not agree with him, but I do think that the Greek words for love are particularly descriptive and elegant. They are the kind of words that embrace an entire concept, removing the need to try and explain it in bits and pieces. In the Bible, translated from the Greek of course, we find several types of love. In Greek, Eros is romantic, passionate love. It's the kind of love one experiences when "the moon hits your eye like a big pizza pie". Philia is the kind of love we share with good friends, confidantes, and those whom we trust. Storge (stor-jay) is the love we have for family, for parents, siblings, and children. Last, but definitely not least, is Agape. Agape describes a love that is boundless. It is a love for all mankind and all of creation. It is unselfish and enduring. It is steadfast and courageous. It is the love God has for us and the love we are to have for one another. The candles on our Advent wreath symbolize peace, joy, hope, and love. Agape! In a world where the word "love" is used superficially far too often and knowingly not often enough, we are reminded that true love is manifest in the love God has for us. It is a love so profound that Jesus became incarnate from the Virgin Mary, lived among us, suffered death and was buried as a sacrifice for all, and invites us to join Him in the resurrected life. The candles on the Advent wreath remind us that over 300 years before the Christian church developed and became the official religion of an empire, we celebrate the incarnation of God's love, Agape, into the world.

It is wonderful, and so fitting, that we have included the Magnificat, the Song of Mary, into our worship today. All of creation sprang from the imagination of God. All things came into being, including all things male and female. It was a young woman on the feminine side of creation, a woman of no social standing other than that given to her by the men in her life, through whom the Messiah was born. The women knew what was going on first! In today's gospel reading Mary visited her cousin Elizabeth in the sixth month of her pregnancy. The child carried by Elizabeth, the child who would become John the Baptist, leapt for joy in her womb.

Elizabeth, filled by the Spirit, blessed Mary, for at that moment she knew that Mary was the mother of the Lord. A few months later, in the most humble of circumstances, Jesus was born.

There was a reason for emphasizing the humble circumstances surrounding the birth of Jesus. The Greco-Roman power structure in that part of the ancient world allowed for very little social mobility. There were a very few powerful aristocrats, a small merchant class, occupying soldiers, and multitudes of poor people and slaves. Most people were subsistence farmers. To deliberately bypass the major urban centers and tell the story of a Messiah being conceived and born essentially in the “middle of nowhere” was a radical idea. The Jewish people of that era believed that the Messiah who would restore Israel to greatness would be a powerful, charismatic political and/or military figure, in keeping with the top down power structure of the times. Further, the idea of the lowly being lifted up and the powerful being brought down from their thrones was not an idea that the people in charge could tolerate. God’s action in exalting the humble Mary reminds us of the ministry of Jesus, who spent his earthly life in the service of the sick, the poor, and the hungry. Jesus reserved his invective for the rich and powerful. It led to the end of his earthly ministry, yet it founded his eternal one.

Agape. When the angel Gabriel tells Mary that she is to bear a child, she responds with faith and fortitude. She is humble and obedient, but not in a servile way. She is instead determined and steadfast. It really is incredible when you think about it. Mary is so young when she is presented with the news that she will bear the Savior of the world. She didn’t have any experience or training in the matter. She may have been tempted to yield to skepticism or scorn or blatant disbelief, but she did not. She trusted in God. In today’s world there are seemingly insurmountable problems in our politics, world peace, the ecology of the planet, and in a persistent pandemic. In our own lives we can’t always predict when we will be presented with challenges or obstacles that can make our knees buckle! Like Mary, we have to trust that God will accompany us along the way. Agape, God’s love, is a love that incorporates and transcends all other types of love. It can require sacrifice, and make demands of us we are not sure we can fulfill. But when we look at our wreath, we are reminded that in spite of all the examples to the contrary, God’s love is alive and at work in the world, both among us and through us. Our faith tells us that in the end God’s love will triumph. We can experience joy. We can be at peace. There is hope, and ultimately, Love wins! You know, when Jesus asked Peter if he loved Him, Peter insisted that he did. Peter, however, was talking about *Philia*, the love of friends. He could not quite get his mind around *agape*. Young Mary had the right idea from the start! In just a handful of days, we will light the candle commemorating the birth of the Savior and the love He brought into this world, a love which commands us, like Mary, to be filled with the Holy Spirit, to trust and to love God with all our might, and to love our neighbors, all of them, as we love ourselves. A love that can change the world. Amen.