Language is a complex thing. On the one hand, it allows us to communicate in such nuanced, specific, evocative ways, and is essential to the flourishing of complex human systems. On the other, it so often falls short when it comes to describing those things closest to our hearts, and leads to an infinite number of opportunities for misunderstanding. There are, of course, the obvious limitations of language, like that there are so many, and each incomprehensible to the other. How many great ideas requiring just the spark of one conversation between two particular people whom fate manages to bring together on a bus, in a café, or at a conference, never come to be simply because one speaks French and the other Farsee? And even if we share a mother tongue, how many times have we tried to say something helpful, something generous, something compassionate, and it has been received as rebuke or criticism? Or, how many times have we stood on a mountaintop, filled with an overwhelming sense of awe and wonder, wanting to share with someone close to us what this feels like but also knowing there are just no words for it. And how many times has the really particular, technical language of a specialty - think medical jargon, or tech jargon, or Church speak – actually made that field less comprehensible to those outside it?

Even in a particular language, colloquialisms evolve as surely as species over time. There have been a number of articles floating around social media lately explaining millennial-ese to those born before 1981, defining words and phrases like “woke,” “lit,” and “FOMO.” (Had Facebook existed in the sixties, perhaps parents would have appreciated a similar guide to “groovy,” “boss,” “cool cat” or “far out.”) As a result, translation and interpretation are sources of great joy and frustration for twenty-first century Americans trying to read and understand the Bible. When we come to our scripture, we are coming to ancient stories told and retold for countless generations before they were written down, and when they were written down they were written in a language that is foreign to most of us by people shaped by a completely different cultural landscape. Even if you happened to grow up with parents fluent in Greek, Aramaic, and Hebrew (lucky you!), those languages have also grown and changed since ancient times.
In this sense, translation – across languages and across time – is both a science and an art, and even when done with exquisite skill, there is so much we still might miss. Notable for us this morning is the nuance around that ever so evocative word, love. We’ve been hearing a lot about love these last few weeks, particularly in The First Letter from John and John’s Gospel, which are both generally attributed to the same community if not the same author. But what do these texts mean by love? The Letter from John talks about loving others and loving God, and says that we accomplish or experience this love by keeping God’s commandments - which, in Jewish terms, could also be described as “walking in God’s ways,” a kind of holy and wholesome rootedness in divine blessings and obligations. It goes on to say that, somehow, we are empowered in this – in keeping God’s commandments, in practicing this sacred love – by water and blood.

For most people today, our first associations with love relate to romance. We think of love as that mysterious, sometimes overwhelming, sense of attraction and affection that our culture associates with intimate partnership. If you look “love” up in the dictionary, this informs the first definitions you’ll find: 1) an intense feeling of deep affection; and, 2) a deep romantic or sexual attachment. This limited notion of love is problematic for a whole host of reasons, like what happens in partnership when that intense feeling of deep affection fades or changes? Is the love gone? Is the relationship over? The answer, of course, is no. But our language makes it hard to talk about this, because we only have one word for “love,” which we unrealistically expect to describe, explain, and communicate a wide range of dynamic emotions and experiences.

But unlike contemporary American English, ancient Greek has not one word for love but six words for love. Eros referred to sexual passion, the kind of “love” I was just describing, whereas philia describes the love we experience in a deep friendship. (As a side note, many marriages start thanks to eros, but thrive thanks to philia. Cultural Anthropologist Margaret Mead once said that every person should have three marriages, even if they are to the same person, and I imagine the transformation of loves is some part of how that works.) Ludus is a playful, lighthearted love, and pragma a longstanding love. Philautia is the love we experience for ourselves.

And then there is agape, defined as universal love or unconditional love. And this love – agape – is the love that Jesus and his followers are so fond of talking about, because this love describes the love God has for us and which we aspire to have for one another. When Jesus talks
today about loving one another, or elsewhere gives the great commandment to love God with all our heart, mind, strength, and soul, and to love our neighbors as ourselves, he is not saying that we should fall intensely in love, in lust, losing our minds and our better judgment, with God and our neighbors and ourselves, which is kind of an absurd proposition when you think about it. No. He must mean something else by love. And he does.

Agape is deep and abiding. It is stabilizing and centering. It is self-giving and generous. It is the love we nourish and nurture here, as a parish family, and, not surprisingly, since all love flows first from God, it is the same love in which God holds us each and all together. When we succeed in loving God, and loving our neighbors as God loves our neighbors, and loving ourselves as God loves us, we are, actually, truly, participating in God’s agape. This is part of what Jesus is trying to say when he encourages us to “abide in his love” by observing God’s commandments. Ultimately, this is an imminently practical teaching: simply live in the ways that are life-giving - committed to certain disciplines, celebrating God’s blessings - and you won’t be able to avoid living in divine love. There’s a basic cause and effect relationship between the two that is not all that complex.

What is a bit of a mystery, though, is the idea that this is enabled somehow by the one who comes in water and blood, likely referring to the water of baptism and Christ’s blood shed on the cross. Both water and blood are necessary for life, but they also have negative connotations. The flowing of blood in our bodies means life, but the spilling of blood means death. In pre-agricultural societies, water was an essential but fearsome element. Rain watered crops but could be accompanied by destructive, torrential storms. Rivers provided food and mobility, but they flooded, and people drowned. Yet somehow God has used these unlikely things to create and further God’s love. How?

I was recently reminded of a couple basic principles from chemistry: that, sometimes, two dangerous things can come together to produce something necessary and life-giving, depending, to a large extent, on how they come together. For example, hydrochloric acid and lye are each on their own highly corrosive substances. Either can cause severe burns and, in extreme exposure, could dissolve flesh and bone. These two compounds are also highly reactive, so that if you pour a large amount of one into the other you’ll cause an explosion. But if, instead of mixing things up too quickly, you use a tiny valve to add one drop into the other, you’ll get just a little fizzle, like the bubbles from alka seltzer, and if you keep going, drop by drop, slowly bringing
these dangerous things together, eventually something that might seem extremely unlikely will happen: the two substances will entirely neutralize one another, and will be transformed from hydrochloric acid and lye into water and salt. This process is called titration, and I was actually reminded of it reading a book about the healing of trauma, which argues there is a mirror to this chemical process in integrating overwhelming experience that leads to a kind of internal neutralization.¹

So God, bringing together water and blood in a particular way – a way guided by the Spirit – manages, through the life and death and eternal life of Jesus, to empower us in love, which seems an unlikely result of this combination, this reaction, but such unlikely results are the stuff of life, apparently, and not uncommon at all. This is the slow, surprising process of salvation unfolding, which ultimately heals everything that has been torn apart and separated from God.

“Love” in modern parlance may seem a soft, fleeting thing, but today’s readings remind us how robust, varied and strong love really is. They remind us that love is hard won and pervasive. And that if we know what to look for, we’ll see it everywhere. It is agape that allows us to allowing us to extend ourselves in service to the stranger, purposing the work of love in ways that have nothing to do with our satisfaction, pleasure, or ego. And it is agape that has been at the heart of the great social movements of the last century, motivated by a collective vision of a society not only committed to equality but rooted in love. May we who have been saved by water and blood walk in the ways of God, abiding in that love that is making all things new, even unto now. Amen.