

RELATIONS

"This is my commandment, that you love one another (ἀγαπάτε) as I have loved (ἠγάπησα) you. No one has greater love (ἀγάπην) than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. John 15:12f



There are several words in Greek for the one English word, “love”. I thought I would illustrate their meaning with reference to Hollywood. The first two words are *Eros* (ἔρως) which means to be infatuated with a person, an object or an idea, and *storge* (στοργή), which is familial love, the love of parents (and grandparents) for their children. Then two other words: φιλέω and ἀγαπάω. The first means to have a warm affection for another and the second, to wish one well.

The ancient Greeks considered Eros to be dangerous and frightening as it involved a “loss of control,” as though to say, “I couldn’t help myself.” It is the appreciation of beauty both external and within. It’s what we view frequently on the silver screen. I would guess that most movies at the moment are romances. To be a success in my book they need to have a memorable musical score and demonstrate that “the path of true love never did run smooth.”¹ The lovers need to fight, separate, or even die. I have chosen *West Side Story* (1957), Leonard Bernstein’s adaptation of Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*.² The Jets and the Sharks are two gangs who are bitter enemies, fighting for turf in New York City. Tony and Maria, members of rival gangs, fall in love and sing: “Make of our hands one hand; make of our hearts one heart.” After the rumble, Chino who was engaged to marry Maria shoots Tony and he dies in his lover’s arms. It is a very satisfactory love story!³

Στοργή is an appropriate love to think about today, Mothers’ Day. Of the various movies that are about families I have selected *On Golden Pond* (1981).⁴ Katherine Hepburn and Henry Fonda play an elderly couple who spend one last summer at their lake cabin in New England. They are joined by their adult daughter, Jane Fonda (Henry’s daughter in real life) who has a conflicted relationship with her father. But in the end they are reconciled, a sign of hope for those who are estranged.⁵

Neither of these words is found in the New Testament. But a similar word, φιλόστοργος (meaning “tenderly loving” or “kindly affectionate”) is found one time in Paul’s marks of a Christian in the Letter to the Romans, where it means “to be devoted towards another.”⁶ It can also mean to love your country or your baseball team!

¹ The familiar quote comes from Lysander in Shakespeare’s *Midsummer Night’s Dream* (1595: 1.1.135)

² *West Side Story*. The Broadway production came out in 1957; the movie was released in 1961 and starred Natalie Wood and Richard Beymer. It grossed \$44 million on a budget of \$6 million. It swept the Oscars, winning 11. Leonardo di Caprio and Claire Danes starred in a 1996 movie of *Romeo and Juliet*. There’s a 2021 remake of WSS. There was an excellent performance at the summer Rep Theater in Santa Rosa in 2017. I “love” Prokofiev’s ballet, *Op. 64* (1938)

³ Other romances include the novels of Jane Austen (*Sense and Sensibility*, 1811; *Pride and Prejudice*, 1813; *Emma*, 1816 etc), *Casablanca* (1942), Audrey Hepburn in *Roman Holiday* (1957), Robert Redford in *The Way We Were* (1973) and *Barefoot in the Park* (1967), *Titanic* (1997), and *Dirty Dancing* (1987) among many others

⁴ *On Golden Pond* was highly popular; it grossed \$120 million, and was nominated for ten Oscars, winning three

⁵ Other family movies I can think of include: Other family movies include: *Moonstruck* (1987 with Olympia Dukakis), *Meet the Parents* (2000), *My Big Fat Greek wedding* (2002), *Monster-in-Law* (2005 with Jane Fonda) and *The Family Stone* (2005, starring the quintessential mother, Diane Keaton). And TV series such as *All in the Family* (1971-1979), *the Addams Family* (1964-1966)

⁶ Romans 12:10, ““Love (φιλόστοργοι = (be) devoted towards) one another with mutual affection (φιλαδελφία = in brotherly love); outdo one another in showing honour (προηγούμενοι = esteeming one another). The NRSV version is a paraphrase

Φιλία means “affectionate regard”, usually between equals. It is a dispassionate virtuous love. It describes the relationship between Jesus and his Heavenly Father and his relationship with his friend Lazarus.⁷ It also means an attachment to status or position; the Pharisees (for example) love (or covet) the seats of honour at banquets and the best pews in the synagogues.⁸ My illustration is the movie, *Shawshank Redemption* (1994).⁹ Over two decades in prison, the Tim Robbins character befriends a fellow prisoner played by Morgan Freeman, two unlikely friends. Robbins eventually escapes from the prison, hides some money under a tree and makes his way to Mexico. When Freeman is paroled, he goes to Mexico where he finds Robbins on a beach. The two reunited friends happily embrace.¹⁰

So we come finally to the fourth word translated “love” which is the point of this sermon. Perhaps “love” is not an accurate translation of ἀγάπη. Whereas Φιλία is an emotion which comes from the heart, ἀγάπη means “admiration,” “veneration,” and “esteem,” which comes from the mind and has the sense of “commitment” or “preference for another person.” “Love” for God and “love” for neighbor is the word ἀγάπη.¹¹ It is translated as “charity” in the KJV version of Paul’s “Hymn”: “Charity suffereth long, and is kind; charity envieth not; charity vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up.”¹² It is central to Christian thinking but is used in secular contexts as well. It occurs nearly 120 times in the NT and four times in five verses of our gospel.¹³ It has the overtone of suffering and sacrifice. Thus Jesus said that the greatest example of ἀγάπη is the willingness to lay down one’s life for one’s friends, which is what he did for us on the cross.

Thomas Aquinas wrote that “to love means to consistently will and choose the good of the other.”¹⁴ It’s an act of will. As an illustration of ἀγάπη, I have chosen a movie which you are probably not familiar with, *The Last Full Measure* (2019).¹⁵ In April 1966, during a fire fight in the Vietnam War, Airman 1st Class William Pitsenbarger was lowered from his helicopter to aid the troops on the ground. After saving many he was ordered to return to his helicopter. But he disobeyed orders in order to stay behind to bind up the wounded and distribute ammunition to those who were still alive. Inevitably he was killed. Nearly 35 years later his Air Force Cross was upgraded to the Medal of Honor (the American equivalent of the Victoria Cross): “for conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity in action at the risk of his life above and beyond the call of duty.”¹⁶

Jesus gives us a new commandment to love one another as he has loved us. This kind of love (ἀγάπη) is different from other kinds of love; it is not a feeling but a decision. It reflects our desires and intentions. It cannot be earned with any expectation that it will be reciprocated. It will require our best efforts. It may (and probably will) be costly. But that’s what it takes to be his disciples.

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⁷ John 5:20 and John 11:3, Martha and Mary sent a message to Jesus saying, “Lazarus whom you love (φιλεῖς) is sick”

⁸ Matthew 23:6. See also Matthew 6:5, the hypocrites love to pray in public places where people will admire them

⁹ *Shawshank Redemption* was “a sleeper.” It cost \$20 million to make but earned only \$16 million on its initial run, because of the unpopularity of prison movies and the lack of female characters. But it was nominated for 7 Oscars (winning none) and ultimately grossed \$58 million

¹⁰ Other “buddy movies” include Jack Lemmon and Tony Curtis in *Some Like It Hot* (1959) and Jack Lemmon and Walter Matthau in *The Odd Couple* (1968), Robert Redford and Paul Newman in *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (1969), Geena Davis and Susan Sarandon in *Thelma and Louise* (1991), Morgan Freeman and Jack Nicholson in *The Bucket List* (2007) among many others

¹¹ Matthew 22:37, Mark 12:29f, Luke 10:27

¹² 1 Corinthians 13:4 (KJV)

¹³ John 15:9, 15:10, 15:10, 15:13

¹⁴ This was also Scott Peck’s definition of love in *The Road Less Traveled: A New Psychology of Love, Traditional Values and Spiritual Growth* (1978)

¹⁵ “Pits” flew almost 300 rescue missions

¹⁶ Other ἀγάπη movies include: *Schindler’s List* (1993), *The Mission* (1986) and *Star Wars II: The Wrath of Khan* (1982) where Spock enters the engine room to restore warp power, knowing that it is filled with radiation and thus sacrifices his life to save the crew