

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the one who came to show us God's Agape Love, Jesus Christ our Savior, amen.

At the end of the year some of you may receive a year-end statement on what your various stocks, bonds, or mutual funds have done throughout the year. The basic concept behind a mutual fund, is that you regularly invest money in a large variety of stocks, in the hope they will go up during the year. Then, when you receive the statement - it tells you how much money you have invested, and how much money you have made in short-term and long-term gains.

At most churches, people who regularly give to the church receive quarterly or at least annual statements informing them how much money they have given during that period. Churches provide these statements for a variety of reasons. So people can compare their own records to what the church has in case an error has happened or just as a friendly reminder showing where people are at in their giving throughout the year. The thought behind more frequent statements is so people might have the opportunity to see where they stand periodically and grow in their giving.

When I first interviewed here at Trinity, I remember being told by the interview team that Trinity folks were generally happy with the size of the congregation and I was asked how important growing our numbers would be if I

was called here. My answer then and now is the same. There are many ways to grow. It's not always about the numbers for me. We *can* grow in the number of people. The more the merrier the saying goes, but let's face it, we're located in a pretty religious county and most of the folks around here already have their religious beliefs set and have deep roots in their own congregations, even if they don't attend worship services very often. So, huge numerical growth probably isn't in the cards for us. That doesn't mean we can't grow in many other ways...

What would you think if every year instead of receiving a statement informing you of how much money you gave to the church, you received a year-end statement on your spiritual growth? How do you think that might read? Would it say, "you grew ten percent in faith, two percent in works, but you shrank three percent in love"? How much would it say you invested in your spiritual growth? Obviously, such a report would be hard if not impossible, since much of it isn't able to be measured like money or assets. Yet Paul, in the second lesson, was very interested in the topic of growth - getting the Philippians to grow. As Christians we all have the invitation and calling to grow in so many ways to be more like the one we follow, Jesus Christ. Paul said, "This is my prayer: that your love may overflow more and more." He was praying specifically for a growth in love for the Philippians. So today, instead of looking at our General Treasury Fund or our Mutual Funds, we'll take a look at our Love Fund.

“Love” is a pretty broad term and even harder to measure. I love Mod Pizza and I love chocolate, but I also love my children and grandchildren and I love my wife, most importantly, I love God. In English it's hard to know what we mean by the word love. In the Greek language that the New Testament was written in there are four different terms for love and all have different meanings. The one Paul uses in our 2nd lesson today is “agape” - which is often used for God's love for us. Agape is often referred to as “unconditional” love or “self-giving” or “sacrificial” love. It's used in John 3:16 as the driving force that led God to send His only Son to die for us. Paul wanted that same kind of love to “overflow” in the Philippians. The real meaning in the Greek is more like growing to the point of having more than is needed. Paul wanted the Philippians to grow in love so that there was so much love that it overflowed into everything they did.

Agape love isn't the kind of love most Americans can describe. We think of love as a feeling we get when we're around someone who we're in love with. That's nothing like agape love. Agape love is an action word. Agape love moves us to action... Agape love is an unconditional love and can be applied in a variety of ways. It's the love of a parent despite the child's rebellious ways. Agape love is when an employer forgives the greedy employee. Agape love is when we make a sacrificial gift knowing it will be used for people we don't know and will never meet. It's in the making of our quilts and in the feeding of strangers though Grace

Resurrection and the Choice Fish pantry and so many other ministries you all do in this Church and for our neighbors.

In this case, Paul was praying for the Philippians to show their love in two specific instances - that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight. The first thing Paul wanted the Philippians to do was grow in their love in the sphere of knowledge. One of the problems God had with the Israelites is they ultimately didn't KNOW their Lord. In those Old Testament days God told the Israelites through Isaiah - The ox knows his master, the donkey his owner's manger, but Israel does not know, my people do not understand. (Is 1:3) I wonder if things have changed much since Old Testament times...

Is there anyone who doesn't want to be a more loving person? You can try your best to be a better person, but the only way I know for sure your love can really grow more is if you know more about God - invest in your knowledge. I'm not talking about head knowledge here. I'm not saying we should know more about God, I'm saying we can all get to know Him more, in a deeper way. The Book of 1st John says, "Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. (1 Jn 4:8-11) God's Word has a miraculous way of showing us how undeserving we are,

(that's the LAW) and how unconditionally our God truly does love us (that's GRACE). When we get to know this God who unconditionally loves us better, we can't help but grow in love. So, the key - THE KEY - to being more loving is first of all knowing how much God loves you.

In our world today it's easy to get caught up in all the rhetoric, especially on Social Media. I find myself more angry, more unforgiving, more judgmental, less caring – and I believe it's because I'm spending too much time listening to the news and on social media and not enough time getting to know God through His Word. I think I'm pretty typical in this...

Why did Paul want the Philippians to grow in love and knowledge of God? The answer lays in the way our world, the devil, and sin all work together, against us. More and more it's getting harder to know right from wrong. The more we know God's Word, the more we'll be able to discern what is best. This was Paul's 2nd reason for praying for the Philippians, so they could discern what is best. In the Book of Romans Paul said unbelievers invent ways of doing evil; they're senseless, faithless, heartless, and ruthless... He said they not only continue to do these very evil things, but also approve of those who practice them. (Ro 1:30-32)

The problem we are having more and more with society is that people are approving of the very things that God's Word clearly says are evil - and it's happening even within the church. We have a Pastor, ordained through our ELCA

seminary out in Los Angeles, who has written several books, each one more provocative and controversial than the previous one. She has a book coming out in January in which she states not only is viewing pornography not a sin, but the condemnation the Church has placed on that behavior has done irreparable harm to those who practice it. Yes, you understood me correctly, when we say something even as blatant as viewing porn is bad, we're the ones who are evil... In this kind of culture, where an ordained Pastor can put out such heresy how can the average person hope to discern right from wrong? My dear friends, it's more important than ever to KNOW our Lord - not only who He is, but also HOW He wants us to live. If people really knew their Bibles and their Lord, they would know these modern-day evils are not permissible. The problem is that people don't! That's why Paul prayed the Philippians would grow in their knowledge in order to gain insight so we can discern God's will...

May we continue to read and study God's Word so we're not duped by false teaching and false prophets. May we continue in God's Word so that when the paths are curved and the mountains are treacherous, we can be the ones who still make the Messiah's path straight. May we continue in God's Word so we can be His people who keep His Kingdom alive today and for future generations despite all the pressure to compromise and change with the blowing of the wind. May we always grow in our love for God and for one another, amen.