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AGAPE AND THE ACTIVITY OF “REFRAMING”

Part I of these notes is a draft of the portion of the paper in which I try to set up the questions I intend to address. Part II is a list of the contexts in which I will consider the questions I raise in Part I.

PART I

Today I want to talk about why it is so difficult to talk about *agape* and law in our world.

1.

One reason is the fact that *agape* itself is term with deep and shifting meanings. Like almost all words, it means different things to different speakers, and different things to the same speakers in different contexts. Sometimes such differences can be addressed by stipulated definitions, but this is not possible with *agape*, for what it points towards is not an object or concept, but the transformation of the whole self from the marrow outward.

Even if we try, we cannot just decide with the reasoning and judging part of the brain that from now on we will act out of *agape*. What the word calls for is a change in our selves and souls, a change that cannot really be described or predicted, though it may be perceived. Its meaning for each of us in the Christian tradition will be shaped by the way we have responded to the whole context in which we find it, that is in the way we have responded to the Gospels, the Epistles, and our lives in the church and with each other.

This means that each of us as we speak about *agape* will be giving it definitions of our own, not only in the way we use it, but in the way we talk about it, in the way we talk to each other, and in the way we talk about other people. We are constantly performing and re-performing the meaning of this crucial word at the very time when we express our commitment to it. It is a center of mystery.

A second reason, which I will not talk about except indirectly, is our own selfishness: those aspects of our nature and character that resist the kind of love of God and neighbor to which Jesus calls us. In thinking about this word, that is, we have to come to terms with our own defects and failures, both of character and imagination.

2.

There is another kind of reason for the difficulty of talking about *agape*, and this is what I shall mainly talk about today: the forces in our culture, and therefore within each of us, that resist and hobble our efforts to think and talk about *agape*, let alone realize it in our lives.

I don't mean to suggest that our culture is uniquely or especially bad, but simply that like every culture it has its characteristic qualities, its ways of focusing and rewarding attention, which work against the possibility of realizing *agape* in our lives. After all, *agape* itself in its Christian origins was a way of working against the premises of the culture it was intended to transform and I think it still works that way.

In a well-known story in the Gospel of Luke a man asks Jesus to make his brother give him his inheritance. Jesus refuses to do that, then uses the man as an example in talking to the crowd around him: "Beware of all sorts of greed." Then, speaking both to the man and to the crowd, he tells the parable about the rich farmer who plans to build a new barn

for his bumper crop, only to learn that his soul is demanded of him that very night. In this parable we can see that whole side of the farmer that makes plans, seeks acquisitions, and hopes to maintain property, is rendered empty and futile by this reframing. This is meant as a lesson to the original questioner, to the crowd, and to us, urging us all to focus upon the first and most important things in life, not upon matters of ultimate indifference. We look at life one way, the wrong way, until it is reframed, when other things, other values, become possible. The reframing enables us to see more clearly, at least for the moment.

The questioner is not a bad person, but he is caught up in the world, in the motives and values that define his society. Of course he wants his inheritance. We would too. What Jesus does both in talking directly to the crowd and in telling the parable is to reframe the moment to include what is normally left out of our ways of thinking--above all, here, the reality of death. Only by this kind of reframing does it become possible to recognize what matters most in life, which is not possessions, but love of God and neighbor.

In this case what is brought into the circle of attention—that we will surely die, and can do so at any moment—is something that the questioner, and the farmer, and we all in some sense “know.” It is not brand new information. What the reframing does is to make it for the moment inescapable as a reality. This event in turn asks us how our lives would be different if we could keep that fact always before us. The fact that after such reframings we slide back into normalcy, over and over, means that our search has to be not only for reframing, but ways of keeping the shift of consciousness they produce more fully with us.

PART II

Such is the basic idea of my talk on agape. In the talk as given I will elaborate on it in two or three of the following contexts:

— the way we think about and talk about our law schools (if we are law teachers);

—the way we think and talk about our country, and its essential qualities and purposes;

—the way we think and talk about economic prosperity, for our nation and for ourselves;

—the way we think and talk about activities we engage in not for what we can get for them, but for their own sake. These would include such things as making gifts to others, meditating, walking in the woods, having supper with the family, trying our hand at painting or music, playing local softball in the evenings, going to church, and so on and on. They should make up a crucial part of any human life.

— the way in we think and talk when we make or evaluate public choices, such as where to locate a new airport, especially when we do so in terms of cost-benefit analysis.

In each case I will be claiming that in our hearts we know that what we want is a life based upon agape, but that even to imagine such a life, much less begin to realize it, we need both to experience a “reframing” of the kind Jesus offers in the parable, and as I suggest above, ways of resisting our tendency to slide back into normalcy.