

+On a flight from Johannesburg, a middle-aged, well-off white South African Lady had found herself sitting next to a black man. She called the cabin crew attendant over to complain about her seating. “What seems to be the problem Madam?” asked the attendant.

“Can’t you see?” she said. “You’ve sat me next to a kaffir. I can’t possibly sit next to this human. Find me another seat!” “Please calm down Madam.” the stewardess replied. “The flight is very full today, but I’ll tell you what I’ll do- I’ll go and check to see if we have any seats available in club or first class.” The woman cocks a snooty look at the black man beside her (not to mention at many of the surrounding passengers also).

A few minutes later the stewardess returns with the good news, which she delivers to the lady, who cannot help but look at the people around her with a smug and self-satisfied grin: “Madam, I discovered we do have one seat in first class”.

Before the lady has a chance to answer, the stewardess continues, “It is most extraordinary to make this kind of upgrade, but, given the circumstances, the captain felt that it was outrageous that someone be forced to sit next to such an obnoxious person.” With which, she turned to the black man sitting next to her, and said: “So if you’d like to get your things, sir, I have your seat ready for you in first class up at the front...”

We see similar prejudice in today’s Gospel. By the time of Jesus Judaism had almost become what we could say was “a closed group”, Jews looked down on those who were not Jews. Others were inferior, they were superior. Jesus challenged that thinking and it is obvious his homily hit a nerve.

The Jews were blind to foreigners being favored by God but that did not mean the foreigners had not been favored by God. The foreigners were cherished by God even though the Jews were too blind to see that.

The society we left as we entered the door of this church is very flawed, with its prejudice, gossips, falsehood and the like. We leave this at the door for this is not the place for that. Here we are all one in Christ Jesus.

The ideal way to relate to others is given to us in our second reading. What many people fail to realize, however that this passage isn’t about the love between a man and a woman, not specifically anyway. It’s about love among Church members, struggling and stumbling through the painful process of trying to be together the Body of Christ.

These Corinthian Christians had been fighting with each other over everything: how they are to worship, to sing, power, prestige, orthodoxy, places in church, and St. Paul is tired of it. He writes to correct these Corinthians and reminds them that they are members of One Body, that they have been called not to exalt themselves but to glorify God together and respect how we do so.

St. Paul says we need each other, as we are family and we do not leave in conflict. He then tells the Corinthians that he will show them a way of building up the Body of Christ that is open not to a few means of worship, but to all of them and that is the way of love. But the love of which he speaks is a sacrificial love that forgives, heals, speaks truth and is willing to see it through.

Of the several Greek words for love, Paul chose the word “agape,” a term used in the New Testament to describe the bonds of love between people, as well as the bonds between God and all humanity. Agape love is the highest form of human love.

It is defined more by its action rather than by its feelings or by its romantic words. Agape love reaches out to affirm, to embrace and to accept another person, whether that other person acknowledges or even accepts the love offered. It’s a love that is purely unselfish and uncommonly generous. It is the love of a parent for their child, the love of spouses, a Christian for their church. This is the kind of love that gives life because it is Christ kind of love.

That’s why it best expresses the love and affection God extends to all of us, in and through the person of Jesus Christ. Paul didn’t just dream up his own, he learned about that type of love from Jesus—the Jesus who was kind and forgiving, who was not rude or jealous or did not put on airs, who is not angry or self-seeking. He learned from Jesus that true love bears all things, is full of hope and trust and has the power to endure all things.

Want to test it out and see how you fair? Substitute your name for love, “Patrick is never jealous...Jim is never boastful or conceited...Jane is never selfish...John does not take offense... Bill is always ready to excuse, to trust, to hope, and endure whatever comes.” That would be agape. \*Please note these are just names, not actual people!

+Karl Downs, the Protestant pastor of a church in Oakland, California, who died at an early age of a heart attack. Several years before that, he was asked by Juvenile Court to take responsibility for a teenage boy who was always getting in trouble. With some misgiving, he accepted that responsibility and in a tough agape kind of way, became a substitute father for the boy.

No one remembers Pastor Karl Downs today, but we all remember the name of that boy. He was Jackie Robinson, the first black man to play Major League baseball— an outstanding young man.

Agape love is the decision to love no matter what— the harder decision, the greater is the love. Jeremiah knew this, Jesus knew this, Paul knew this, Karl Downs knew this and Robinson experienced this. The question for us to answer is do we know this?

If we don't find that kind of love around us (Cathedral?), St. Thérèse of Lisieux once wrote, then we should put it there. The vocation of every Christian, whatever other gifts we may have, is to show sacrificial love and build up the people and the Church around us. And, if we don't find much of it where we are, to put it there.