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Next weekend is Super Bowl Weekend. I am sure there will be lots of parties and celebrations and family get-togethers. So, considering our second reading was about love, and next weekend is Super Bowl weekend, I thought it might be beneficial to talk about a couple of professional football players who demonstrated a true commitment to Christian love.

How many of you have read the book, “I am Third” or seen the movie “Brian’s Song”? The book and movie are about Gale Sayers and Brian Piccolo. Both were drafted to the Chicago Bears in 1965 and both were running backs. Gale was considered the finest running back up to that point in the NFL’s 50 year history. Brian was a strong running back with a lot of heart although he didn’t have the speed, quickness, or moves of Gale Sayers.

Gale’s and Brian’s relationship started out a bit rocky because Brian was considered somewhat of a prankster. The Bears decided to assign Gale (a black man) and Brian (a white man) to room together, which I believe was a first in the NFL up to that point. As time passed Gale’s and Brian’s friendship grew and they played exceptionally well together, but suddenly Brian’s performance began to deteriorate. In football speak, he wasn’t able to make the cuts, hit the holes, or run effectively. The team owners sent Brian to the hospital where doctors discovered that he had terminal cancer.

In one scene from the movie, Gale is being given the coveted George S. Halas Award, which was given to the player who demonstrated abandon and courage in spite of injury or personal hardship. Instead of accepting the award, Gale told the crowd that it should belong to his friend, Brian Piccolo, because Brian had demonstrated real courage in the face of terminal cancer. And then he said something even more profound—he said tearfully and emotionally, knowing that Brian was dying, “I love Brian Piccolo. And, I’d like all of you to love him too. And, tonight when you hit your knees, please ask God to love him.”

Later Gale wrote the book “I am Third”, where he said: “God is first. My friends are second. I am third.” What a beautiful commitment to fulfill God’s greatest commandments-Love God with your whole heart, soul, mind, and strength. And, love your neighbor as yourself.”

In our modern world we use the word love in so many ways that its meaning is blurred. Love is about caring for our neighbors more than ourselves, as Gale Sayers emphasized. But, since the meaning of love has been so distorted, when someone actually esteems another higher than himself, we are kind of shocked. The other day on the RailRunner a man gave a woman his seat and she fainted. When she was revived she thanked him, and he fainted.

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This blurring of the meaning of love is demonstrated most especially in modern love songs. For example, Larry Weaver sang about his love for Little Debbie. The lyrics go:

I'll never forget the day we met in that grocery aisle. I've never been giggly in a Piggly Wiggly but you sure made me smile. And since that day I've been blown away by your sweetness, baby. You make me holler for only a dollar, I love you so... Little Debbie.

Well, he is singing about how he loves the Little Debbie sweet cakes.

In his 1973 hit song titled “I Love”, country artist Tom T. Hall sang about his love for 25 different things—from “little baby ducks” to “old pickup trucks, to bourbon in the glass, to green grass, to “life” to “you.” Certainly Hall does not love pickup trucks in the same way he loves another person, yet he used the same term in reference to all 25.

We often hear people say things like, I love flowers, or I love my car, or I love your pearly white teeth, or I love Hostess Twinkies or Little Debbies. Jesus certainly wouldn't use the word “love” in that manner, because when He speaks of love is referring to the truth of what love actually is- and that is--desiring and working toward the Heavenly Good of another person. That is what love is.

On January 2nd of this year I had the honor and privilege to act as Deacon of the Word at the wedding of Steve and Terri Coggeshall's daughter Caroline Coggeshall. Steve and Terri send their love. You may remember them—they lifted our spirits by leading our choir and they recorded a beautiful CD with Renee and Cathy LeClaire called Holy Ground.

Caroline married a very nice young man named Kris. A beautiful wedding. A beautiful bride. A joyful reception.

I have always been interested in the bride's and groom's choice of readings for their wedding. In this case, Kris and Caroline chose John 15:12-16.

Jesus said to his disciples: 'This is my commandment: love one another as I love you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends'. You are my friends if you do what I command you.

At first glance one might think that Jesus is being dictatorial. But, after taking time to reflect on this passage it becomes clear that Jesus is saying that the way He loves His disciples is to lay down His life for them, and if they, too, lay down their lives in imitation

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of Him, they, and we, will truly be His friends. I cannot think of anything more awesome than to be a friend of Jesus Christ, the Son of the living God.

So, when Kris and Caroline chose that reading, in essence they were telling one another that they would lay down their lives for each other—that each would esteem the other higher than himself or herself. That is what Jesus is talking about and that is the love referred to in our second reading from Saint Paul to the Corinthians.

Jesus says we are to first love God with our whole heart, soul, mind, and strength, and second to love our neighbors as ourselves.

As Christians, when we say that we love another person, it means that our actions and desires are first and foremost ordered to God and, after that, we can desire the goods of the earth for the person, provided they are compatible with God's will. Otherwise, we may be using the word "love" falsely as our modern world does and we may desire something that is not good.

For example, if a husband gives his wife a romantic hug, that is a human emotion and action ordered to a heavenly good. But, if the husband were to hug another woman in exactly the same way, such an emotion and action would not be ordered toward heaven, and therefore, although many in our modern world would call that love, it would not be so—it would be the opposite.

Pope Benedict wrote about this in his encyclical *Caritas in Veritate*, in which he referred to Christian love more precisely as *charity*, which defends truth. He wrote:

Without truth, charity degenerates into sentimentality. Love becomes an empty shell, to be filled in an arbitrary way. In a culture without truth, this is the fatal risk facing love. It falls prey to...subjective emotions and opinions, the word "love" is abused and distorted, to the point where it comes to mean the opposite... A Christianity of charity without truth would be more or less interchangeable with a pool of good sentiments, helpful for social cohesion, but of little relevance. In other words, there would no longer be any real place for God in the world. (CV 1, 3-4)

As we have seen, love has broad meaning in English – so broad that the Christian meaning is often obscured. In the Greek language, there isn't just one word for love, there are three words for love: eros, philia, and agape.

Eros – refers to physical love. Philia-to friendship. Agape-to sacrificial love. Eros is used only twice in the Bible, both in the Old Testament. In the New Testament, the inspired

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writers use the word “agape” predominantly. God is clearly calling us to higher forms of love than the physical.

Recall the scene where Christ appears on the seashore after His resurrection and has built a charcoal fire. Peter was out fishing. Peter had gone back to his old ways. When John said, “It is the Lord”, Peter jumped into the water, rather than coming to the shore with the others on the boat. Perhaps that fire reminded Peter of another fire ten days earlier in the courtyard where he denied the Lord three times.

When Peter arrived on shore the Lord said: “Simon, son of John, do you love me?” He asked three times which corresponded to the Peter’s denials. Since Peter was not acting like the “ROCK”, Christ did not call him the Rock, He called him Simon—his old name—because Peter had gone back to his old ways.

Christ’s first and second use of the word “love” was the Greek word, “agape”, which meant that he was asking if Peter loved Christ with a sacrificial love. The third word used was “philia”, which meant that Christ was asking Peter if he loved Him with a natural human affection—with friendship.

Each time Christ asked Peter if he loved him, Peter would say that he did, and the Lord would then give him a command—“Feed my lambs, tend my sheep, feed my lambs”, in other words the Lord was telling Peter to lay down his life for both God and His people.

When the Lord asked if Peter loved Him in a complete, self-abandoning way, Peter responded with the word philia, saying: Yes, we are friends, we are buddies. Finally, the 3rd time, Jesus relented: “Simon, do you *filios* me? Peter was not yet ready for absolute commitment. The text continues to predict Peter’s eventual martyrdom—reflecting the necessity of Peter’s total commitment.

Loving Jesus – being a disciple – and answering affirmatively when He asks if we “agape” Him—that we love Him with total abandonment--leads down a narrowing path.

It is liberating to abandon the self, but it also entails death of self. Living this “agape” is being more than Jesus’ buddy. It is being totally devoted to him as Lord of our lives, and it is laying down our lives to care for others. Most people find this “agape” journey to be difficult. It is comforting to note that Peter, our first pope, did as well.