

Scripture Reading for May 2 2021

1 John 4:7-21 (NRSV)

Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.

By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit. And we have seen and do testify that the Father has sent his Son as the Savior of the world. God *abides* in those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God, and they *abide* in God. So we have known and believe the love that God has for us.

God is love, and those who *abide* in love abide in God, and God abides in them. Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness on the day of judgment, because as he is, so are we in this world. There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. We love because he first loved us. Those who say, "I love God," and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.

John 14:15-17; 15:1-4, 9, 12, 26 (NRSV)

Jesus said: "If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he *abides* with you, and he will be *in* you.

"I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine grower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. *Abide* in me as I *abide* in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me.

As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; *abide* in my love. "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.

"When the Advocate comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who comes from the Father, he will testify on my behalf.

Sermon: God is Love

“All You Need is Love,” sang the Beatles; Huey Lewis chanted on about, “The Power of Love,” and one of Whitney Houston’s big hits was, “The Greatest Love of All.” That song contained the line, “The greatest love of all is easy to achieve; learning to love *yourself* is the greatest love of all.” While healthy self-love is certainly very important, I wouldn’t say that it’s so “easy” to achieve! Moreover, the writer of 1 John certainly *wouldn’t* call self-love, “The greatest love of all.” What these and many other songs about love tend to do is both sentimentalize love and reference love in our purely own terms. Love, then, is defined by *me*, and is all about *me* and *my* relationships. As another song writer, Larry Norman, quipped, “The Beatles said ‘all you need is love,’ and then they broke up!”¹ Love is clearly not enough! And we don’t need the Beatles’ example to prove that point, we know it ourselves from our experience with friends and family.

Love is a major theme in 1 John; we heard something of that last week.² Our reading today contains one of the theological foundations of the Christian faith, namely that: “God *is* love.”³ Yet, we must *not* misinterpret that succinct phrase as simplistic, sentimental, universal, or abstract. That “God is love” *is* the greatest love of all, and that is the *starting* point in defining what the power of love is, and what it can accomplish. That said, our reading today is both profound *and* dense. I will do my best to unpack aspects of it this morning, hopefully without trivializing it or making it sappy. . .

John begins by addressing this fellow Christians as “*beloved*.”⁴ John’s audience are *his* beloved and, as will become clear, they are also beloved *by God*. John reiterates the second part of that command of Jesus that we considered last week, namely, “to love one another,”⁵ something he repeats three *times* within the space of five verses! Why this imperative? “Because love *is* from God, and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God,” says John.⁶ First, remember, this is *active*, practical love we’re talking about here;⁷ the kind of love that shares its wealth with those in need!⁸ Second, that phrase “born of God” has echoes of the story of Jesus and Nicodemus in John 3, and his need to be “born again” – or “born from above,” or “from the Spirit,” or to be “born of God.”⁹ We therefore need to be careful in extracting a clause from such a text and twisting it out of context for our own purposes. For example, to claim that *everyone* is a “child of God” because we all “love,” even if it’s only the pet dog,

¹ Larry Norman in his lyrics to his song, *Reader’s Digest*.

² See: <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.235/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Love-with-Actions-and-in-Truth.pdf> .

³ 1 John 4:8, 16. (This reading is arguably more found than 1 Cor 13, but it is good to see them together.)

⁴ 1 John 2:7; 4:1, 7, 11 (NRSV); the NIV as “dear friends,” which misses the Greek word’s root that is linked to the word, *agape*. Recall too from last week (1 John 3:11-24) that John’s rhetoric is polarized, black and white; the same is true here.

⁵ 1 John 4:7, 11-12; see also 1 John 3:11, 23.

⁶ 1 John 4:7.

⁷ 1 John 3:18.

⁸ 1 John 3:17. (I mentioned this last week.)

⁹ See: <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.235/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/A-Confusing-Conversation-with-Nicodemus.pdf> .

is a distortion of John's broader point!¹⁰ Neither can we say that *because* we love others, therefore God *must* love us! That would be as bad as reversing "God is love" to get "love is god," which some today are inclined to do as well!¹¹ This results in a fluffy, nebulous love – the kind of love that's prone to "Silly Love Songs," as Paul McCartney put it. John then reminds his readers of the kind of durable, down-to-earth love that God demonstrated: God's love was *revealed* through his one-of-a-kind Son, Jesus, *sent* into the world that we might have life through him.¹² That statement speaks of God's intentional, personal involvement in history. Divine love is *not* abstract, nor a mere feeling, but realized in flesh-and-blood. And Jesus demonstrated that God's love holds nothing back.¹³ Out of *love*, John says, Jesus "laid down his life for us"¹⁴ and his death was "an atoning sacrifice for our sin."¹⁵ Without getting sidetracked into important theology, John is describing a self-sacrificial, suffering love – not sentimental emotions. That *depth* of love is why John repeats himself again: "Beloved, since God loved us *so much*, we also ought to love one another."¹⁶ In short, God initiates and passionately loves us; our love is *not* self-generated but has its origin in God, for God *is* Love. This whole passage spirals *in* and *around* the theme of love as if it were a jeweler scrutinizing a diamond's facets from multiple angles in the sunlight. It is always centered on God's love, which is different from romantic love, parental love, or altruism.

All this sounds unbelievable, too good to be true! So John reminds his audience that, even though no one has ever seen God, we know that Jesus, God's Son - who was originally with the Father¹⁷ - now *abides* in us and we in him because Jesus has given us his Spirit.¹⁸ John repeats, "God abides in those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God, and they abide in God."¹⁹ This has echoes of Jesus' long speech to his disciples in John 14-17, parts of which were our gospel reading.²⁰ The words "love" and "abides" are both repeated many times in this short letter too. It is the work of the Spirit that makes us aware of God's presence, and it's the work of the Spirit that gives us the certainty that we are truly at peace with God. Moreover, because we have a share in the Spirit, we can know that we collectively *dwell* in God. Paul also says that it's the divine Spirit in our hearts that enables us to address God as *Abba*, or *dear* Father.²¹

Before moving on, let's zoom back to see the overall picture. That God is love is the ultimate explanation of *creation*. We sometimes wonder *why* God created the world. The Christian response is to say that creation is an overflow of trinitarian love. God is love is also the explanation of *free will*. Unless love is

¹⁰ For a start, it negates 1 John 4:8, 20 which makes it clear that it is possible not to know God.

¹¹ It is *God* who defines love, not the other way round!

¹² 1 John 4:9; John 1:18; 3:16-17. We cannot see God, but we *can* see what God has done in Jesus, God's chosen Messiah.

¹³ See John 15:12-13.

¹⁴ 1 John 3:16; John 15:12-13.

¹⁵ 1 John 4:10; 1:7; 2:2. See also Rom 5:8; Gal 2:20.

¹⁶ 1 John 4:11-12. John lays down the basic premise of Christian ethics, and expects the logic of his assertion to be compelling.

¹⁷ 1 John 1:2; John 1:1-2, 14.

¹⁸ See also John 20:21-22.

¹⁹ 1 John 4:14-15, 16b. (cf. 1 John 3:23-24.) In 4:14 there is a reminder that "And *we* have *seen* and do *testify* . . ." pointing to himself (and perhaps other 'old-timers' in the community) of their witness to Jesus in the flesh.

²⁰ See also 1 John 2:24; 3:24.

²¹ Rom 8:15-16.

a *free* response, it is *not* love but coercion. Love, then, is a *relationship*, not an abstract ideal. Divine love is also the explanation of *providence*. God's creating acts are followed by God's constant care for creation, including us. God is love is also the explanation for *redemption*. The very fact that God *is* love moved God to seek out and rescue creation through Jesus the Messiah, God-in-the-flesh.²² And divine love is the explanation for the *life beyond*. The fact that God is love makes it certain that the challenges of life will not have the last word. God's love overcomes evil and death itself.²³ Whatever else theologians tell us about the character and nature of God, the unshakable starting point is that *God is love*.²⁴

That's why John goes on to say: "There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment."²⁵ Yes, there are other metaphors for God, such as an almighty king and a righteous judge. But we must remember that God's power and judgement are *qualified* by divine love – hence those who abide with God have *nothing* to fear. Here John is being pastoral to his young readers and reassuring them in their doubts, and *we* need to take heart today because being afraid is paralyzing. Fear *cannot* generate love, sympathy, tenderness, or compassion. Leaders and preachers cannot scare people into being tolerant or terrify them to be kind! The fruit of fear ends up being distrust, suspicion, and resentment - a *joyless* religion that is actually fruitless. Reverence for God must *not* turn into fear. John contrasts the lovelessness of fear with the fearlessness of love. No longer must we have the anxious, self-tormenting endeavor to please or placate God, rather we are freed to love because we know God first loved us.²⁶

I would like to end this morning by further linking divine love with true *friendship*.²⁷ The love between friends, as we know, is special. That relationship is marked by a mutual attraction (we actually *like* each other's company!), freedom (it's *not* bound by a vow or family ties!), and trust (we can *rely* on each other). The relationship Jesus initially had with his disciples was one of teacher and pupil, even that of master and servant. But John tells us that before Jesus died, he said to his disciples: "I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you *friends*, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father."²⁸ Servants were required to give blind obedience, without necessarily knowing the reason why. Rabbi Jesus has trained and modelled God's love, and he now *entrusts* the disciples with the will and plans of the Father. And Jesus, in calling his followers his *friends*, means that *we* can legitimately - and boldly – say that God *also* calls us "friends."²⁹ Divine *love* seeks divine *friendship* with us, through the Son and the Spirit.

²² "God in the flesh" is a different way of saying "the Word made flesh" (John 1:14; 1 John 1:1-3).

²³ Adapted from William Barclay's commentary on 1 John 4.

²⁴ Naturally, love is not an exhaustive description of God, but a statement of *how* God has revealed himself to us.

²⁵ 1 John 4:18.

²⁶ See 1 John 4:19.

²⁷ See also: <https://securereservercdn.net/198.71.233.235/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/God-is-Love-and-Love-Trusts-2.pdf> .

²⁸ John 15:15.

²⁹ Abraham was also called a "friend of God" (James 2:22-23) because Abraham was trusting and trustworthy, freely committed to God.

A few things follow from this profound thought. First, this friendship does *not*, of course, mean we have equal *status* with God! This is *not* trying to “bring God down to our level,” nor trivialize the meaning of divine love as mere friendship! Even so, I believe God and humans can still be “friends” in a very *real* sense. Second, God not only loves us, he *likes* us! When families fall out, we often still say we “love” each other - because of the blood-bond that ties us together, but we may not actually “like” each other! God *actually likes us*; I encourage you to absorb that thought: God not only *loves* you, but *likes* you! How do we know? Because while we were still sinners, alienated from God, God took the initiative - through God-the-flesh Jesus - to reconcile that fractured relationship.³⁰ Sometimes within our human friendships, once *trust* has been broken, it can’t be mended. Sometimes it can, and that says something very special about that relationship, but that’s not always the case. Because *God* has taken the initiative, God not only loves us, but has demonstrated *trustworthiness* and invites us to love and *trust* in return. Trust is key for friendship. Friendships cannot survive without mutual trust for they are *defined* by mutual trust. Since God *desires* our friendship, this explains why God also desires our trustworthiness.

Theologian Curtis Holtzen describes *trust* as “the willful giving to someone the *freedom* to care for something *you value* in the way *they* believe is best.” He goes on, “It is one thing to expect someone to treat something the way you ask, but trust can be thicker than that. If I trust you in the fullest sense, then I trust your judgments, your reasoning, and your thoughtfulness. It’s not just about obedience. This is the kind of trust between friends; for one to *rely* on the other to do what is right with the friendship *itself*.”³¹ Friendships, if you think about it, have no end goal; the goal is for the friendship *not* to end! As long as the relationship has mutual attraction, freedom, and trust, the friendship will continue. However, *no one* desires friendship with those who are untrustworthy or disloyal. God, in Jesus, has demonstrated that he is trustworthy. The question is, are *we*? Can God *rely* on us?

In conclusion, I started out with music. One of Foreigner’s hits was, “I Want to Know What Love Is.” Hopefully, we have a better idea of that this morning from 1 John! Translating “God is Love” into *friendship* with God also makes that love personal, and intimate, rather than abstract theology. Like all loving friendships, it results in *communication* - which we call prayer and meditation - as well as acts born of love and trust. This intimacy and trustworthiness are what led Paul to speak of God as *Abba*.³² John puts it differently; he says: “God is love, and those who *abide* in love *abide* in God, and God *abides* in them.”³³ To “abide” means freely choosing to be together, or to “*remain* or *live* together,” and surely that is one result of mutual love and trust. Abiding, like trusting, is a continually *active* process; it’s a verb, not a static state of being. Nevertheless, John says that a sure sign that God is continually *abiding* among us is revealed in our loving of one another. To live in love is to live in God. And we are never nearer to God than when we actively love. Amen.

³⁰ See Rom 5:8, 10; 1 John 1:7; 2:2; 4:2b, 9. The *relationship* between God and Adam and Eve in Gen 3 is part of the story!

³¹ Curtis Holtzen; private communication. This type of trust is modelled in the Parable of the Talents (Matt 25:14-30).

³² Rom 8:15, Gal 4:6; see also Mark 14:36.

³³ 1 John 4:16.