

## God Is Love

1 John 4:7-21 *God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.*

The word “love” is used 27 times in our reading today from the First Letter of John. The writer is saying as intensely as possible that love is to be the indispensable characteristic of our lives as followers of Jesus Christ. And this is because love is the very nature of God. “God is love.” That is the Christian’s definition of God. If this is who God is and we claim to be followers of Jesus who embodied that God, then love must be the central vocation of our lives.

That is only evidence that we are who we say or think we are. It has nothing to do with WHAT you believe or how much you know. It has nothing to do with doctrines or even moral systems. Am I making the aim of my life loving others? If so, then I know something about God. If not, then I’m kidding myself. Or as Paul said in First Corinthians: “I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.”

Who exactly are we to love? It might be argued that the writer of 1 John means we are to love only those who are Christian. Maybe we are bound to love only those who are “our kind” of Christian, those who agree with us on particular political, religious, or moral issues. There certainly was in the early Christian community a strong emphasis on loving one’s brothers and sisters in faith, those of one’s own community. Some came to believe that the love Christians are to have, they are to have only for each other.

However, this doesn’t square with other New Testament writings, especially not with Jesus’ teachings. Jesus removed the boundaries of living out God’s love. He taught that we are to act lovingly toward anyone we meet along the way who has been beaten up by life, anyone we encounter. He expanded it further. We are to love even our enemies! You don’t hear that in most Christian churches these days, especially those who have embraced nationalism alongside the cross. It’s a hard teaching for us who, out of our insecurities, turn into enemies those who disagree with us or hurt our feelings or seem more successful or prosperous, either materially or spiritually.

When we make a commitment to Covenant Membership or Community Membership, one of the spiritual disciplines, or practices, we commit to is to *endeavor in every relationship to be a channel of God’s love and forgiveness*. I think that’s pretty much the spirit of what the writer of 1 John is saying. And it is the most challenging and ongoing of all our spiritual work.

God is love. When we love others, we are touching the reality of God. We are born of God, says the writer. Are we having doubts about God? Do we feel out of touch with God? Is God not very real to us at times?

The writer’s answer is this: Go out there and love! Then you will experience God because God is all tied up with love. We don’t experience God by trying to think our way to God. We experience God by loving, by devoting ourselves to a life of loving others. The writer has a helpful way, then, for us to get unstuck when we feel out of touch with God, with ourselves, and with others. The way out is to start loving again. You can’t really know God when you hold yourself apart from others or from the community of faith. It is only in the life of loving and growing in our understanding of and capacity for love that life gets real, that God gets real.

What IS love? The writer says: GOD is love. What is the nature of God as love? This is something we only discover through experience, through living it. Scripture gives us descriptions of God that help: steadfast, compassionate, merciful, forgiving, liberating, justice seeking, peacemaking. But we best discover who God is as love by our experience in loving others.

Last week at our Festival Center Mission Group, Sandy, one of our members, shared her spiritual accountability report. She told us of a recent experience in her family that revealed what love looks like among human beings. This led to a sharing of our own experiences of love and thus of God. Story after story emerged, times when we experienced love, thus God, in the way people acted toward each other. What we discovered was pretty much the same. To love others means to be there for them, to see the best in them, to care for others in a way that leaves them free to be themselves and to love in a way that does not use the other person to get what we want. Of course, we also talked together about what we have tried to do in our Saturday children’s program, to be there for the children, to see them as unique persons with unique personalities and gifts, and to respect their personhood. But most of all, just to be there week after week as a place and as trusted adults they can count on. We have seen many times how this kind of love makes a real difference not only in the children but in us.

The text says that this love, which is God, was present in Jesus as he offered his whole life to God. Jesus’ self-giving life was the expression of God’s own love for the world. God sent the Son to into the world so that we might live through him, so that we might know who we really are and what it really means to be a true human being made in God’s image. God’s love for us and the world in Jesus enables us to live as we were made and meant to live. So, the early Christian community saw in Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection the loving action of God for the sake of the world.

The text goes further. “In this is love, not that we loved God but that God loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins.” Here is the astounding thing: It isn’t that we first loved God but that God took the initiative, always makes the first effort to love us. You see this in some people. The person who always seems to take the initiative to talk about something difficult, to work things through. The person who is the first to go up to a stranger and extend a welcome. The person who loves without waiting for others to show her love.

Yet, this verse also might give us some trouble. The image of a distant, all powerful, male deity ordering the death of his son as a sacrifice for sins no longer communicates love. Widespread abuse of children and our awareness of that abuse make such an image a hindrance, not a help. The New Testament writers used any number of images to try and express the meaning of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. None should be taken by itself alone and none is sufficient. The death of Jesus was a crisis for the earliest followers of Jesus. What to make of this apparent failure! What to do with this contradiction that the true messiah of Israel who was to bring in God's kingdom was snuffed out like a gnat by the power structures! But after the resurrection, there was this deeper understanding that even Jesus' death was somehow an expression of God's love for the world. I don't think what was meant by the atoning sacrifice image was that God demanded Jesus' death to pay for our sins. That has been one interpretation. I think it is more like this: Jesus lived his life in complete union with God and God's love. That kind of life led to his death at the hands of a world that had forgotten itself. His death was like his whole life—an offering, which is the meaning of the word translated “sacrifice,” to God.

So, let's not get hung up on the “theory of atonement.” We must not get caught in concepts or doctrines of any kind. Let's keep focused on the central reality—God is love; Jesus embodied God's love for us; and we can and must, if we call ourselves Jesus' community, love one another and other people. It's very simple to understand, but a great challenge to live.

The last portion of our reading is kind of a summary. God is love, and those who abide, or live, in love abide in God, and God abides in them. Jesus said that he is the vine and we are the branches. We draw our life from the vine and we reach out as branches. Our connection with Jesus is the source of our life. Our connection with God is the source of our loving. If we are striving to live our lives in love, then we can be confident that we are in God, we are connected with and rooted in God.

The kind of love talked about here is not “feelings” of love. It is the life of loving others. It is experience, not feelings and not ideas. In this, it is much the same as the meaning of faith. Faith is not a matter of the intellect. It is not a matter of holding tightly to particular doctrines or beliefs. Faith is living as those who love and trust in God. So faith and love are both a matter of experience, not ideas and not even feelings. Feelings come and go. If we reduce love to feeling good about others, then how are we to love those who simply irritate the tar out of us? How are we to love those who seem so unlovable? That's why it is important to remember that the love that comes from God is love that acts toward others in particular ways...compassion, justice, kindness, liberation. When we are living our lives on the basis of love, then we will experience God as we engage in loving others. Faith will become for us a matter of experience.

The text then brings a new insight. There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear. If we are living our lives on the basis of loving

others, then we will find our fears diminishing as we grow in our capacity to be open to others, to reach out to others, to seek deeper understanding of others instead of jumping to conclusions and putting people in boxes. We will be more willing to open ourselves up to others, to share ourselves. What is “perfect” love? The word used here literally means “mature.” It doesn't mean not making any mistakes as we try to love others. Learning how to love with the kind of love that comes from God is an ongoing and never-ending process. Mostly it's a matter of trial and error, making mistakes and learning from them. The important thing here is this insight that it is fear that keeps us from loving others. And this happens as we grow and deepen in our understanding of how best to love others.

Our fears come out of our insecurities. We are afraid of being rejected. We are afraid of being who we are because someone might not approve. We are afraid of loving because we might get hurt. But these are all fears that are attached to other people and their responses to us. What the writer has in mind is a love that is rooted not in other people and how they respond or don't respond to us. Our loving is rooted in God, not other people. In order to love others, we deepen our experience of God's love for us. We deepen our own lives in God, who is love. That way, we love from a very deep reservoir within us and our relationship with God.

That is an important reason why we work with what we call the inward journey. Prayer, cultivating silence and the capacity to simply sit quietly, reflecting on our inner life and seeing deeply into ourselves...these things help us to ground ourselves in God and God's love for us. In fact, the very practice of prayer and meditation and self-reflection is the practicing of God's love for us. We don't have to DO anything. We simply receive God's love. There is a passive dimension to the life of faith—growing in our capacity to simply receive God's love for us.

The writer comes back to an earlier theme. We love, we are able to love, because God first loved us. If we say that we love God but harbor hatred toward another person, we are liars. Pretty strongly put! How can we claim to love God who cannot be seen if we do not live lovingly toward those we see everyday? Loving other people—and I would also include the whole of creation—is the proof in the pudding. All of our talking, all of our theorizing, all of our worship, all of our proud claims to be faithful people are empty if the main thing for us is not our working at living lives of love.

At the end of her report the other night, Sandy wrote these words: “Experiencing love and giving it to our children and grandchildren and others we meet, so that they can give it to their children and grandchildren and others they meet, is the purpose of life. And I have decided that if there is nothing we do in this life but have love and give it away, then we have lived as God intended.”