

The Letters of John: God is Love

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Good morning! Around the middle of this week I listened to Luke Hildebrandt's sermon online. If you were not there, or have not yet heard it online, I strongly recommend that you give it a listen. I was struck by the thoughtful and entertaining illustrations; I was convicted by his reading of 1 Corinthians 13 with inserts, but I was also wondering—as I listened to him wax eloquent on loving our neighbours—if he was going to leave me anything to say about 1 John 4, which is all about God and love. Then I thought that Scripture itself teaches a lot of the same things from different perspectives. Then I thought, that is also true that John raises the same themes multiple times throughout his first letter. I also thought that, with my inbuilt tendency to organize and to look at things sequentially, that I would not be able to skip a chapter and then return to it afterwards without driving myself crazy. So, this morning, we are going to revisit some of what Luke said from another perspective as we look at 1 John 4. I promise to keep it short and to the point.

Now, I know it was a few weeks ago, but did any of you get up in the wee hours of the morning to watch the royal wedding? I sure didn't. But I did watch some of the service after the fact; I was curious to know how much of a role the

Christian faith would play. It turns out that Bishop Michael Curry referenced a verse from our Scripture passage for this morning – and rightly so, because his sermon was on love. Now, I don't agree with everything he teaches, but in his sermon at the wedding at least, he made some solid points about the love of God, how it is expressed in Jesus' sacrifice, and its self-giving nature. It was wonderful to hear these truths broadcasted across the world. It was well received; everyone is pleased when they hear that 'God is love.' And they ought to be! Yet Bishop Curry was not exactly explicit about the reason Jesus had to die and he certainly said nothing about a day of judgement. But, since John brings these things up in 1 John 4, we don't have that luxury. Yes, God is love, but he is also light. His love, truth, and justice are all rolled together inseparably. And yes, this is a good thing.

“Beloved,” John writes, “let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God.” Some of your translations begin with “Dear friends,” but ‘beloved’ is closer to the Greek and it makes it clear that John is practicing what he preaches. He addresses his audience as ‘beloved’ because he loves them. It does little good to urge others to love each other if you are not yourself a loving person. But what does it mean to love one another?

If we ripped this verse out of the context of the rest of 1 John, it would make a lot of people happy, because it sounds like all you have to do is to ‘love’ in order to be born of God and to know him. And, in our culture, the word love is

sufficiently vague to carry whatever meaning we want to put into it. Our culture, if it were aware of what John says elsewhere, would be appalled by the earlier bits in 1 John about being an antichrist if you deny the human and divine nature of Jesus, and the sharp contrast John makes between those born of God and born of the devil. To the ears of our culture, such things sound bigoted and intolerant. Surely no loving person would really mean such things! Surely love must always be tolerant and affirming of everything. Surely the powerful feeling of love can justify almost anything.

On the other side, others would be horrified by the thought of taking anything out of context in Scripture – and rightfully so. But those who denounce the other side, however rightly, can easily slide into mistakes of their own. While claiming to uphold Scripture in its entirety, they see the needs of others, but, blinded by political or economic ideology—or just straight up greed—refuse to help. Acting contrary to Jesus’ warnings about judging others, they have logs in their eyes while complaining about the specks in the eyes of others who dare to disagree with them. Ignoring Paul’s comments about not judging those outside of the church, they demonize them. Worse still, they twist Scripture into a weapon to legitimize their abuse of others. They may claim to love God. They may claim to love others. But their actions say otherwise. What they claim to believe and what

they actually do contradict one another. This kind of hypocrisy brings disgrace to the Church.

But what does John mean by love? What kind of love is this? Thankfully, he doesn't leave us in any doubt. God's love is revealed in Jesus Christ. As Paul writes in Ephesians 2, Jesus, although "in the form of God" and "equal with God," "emptied himself" by "being born in human likeness." The eternal Word took on another nature, a weak, frail nature, to rescue the ones he loved. Not only did he take on this nature, but he suffered a brutal, excruciating death in order to make it possible for us to be reconciled to God. At the cross, we see the greatest sacrifice that is possible. The Father gives his only Son. As a parent myself, that seems like too much. The idea is one I shrink away from in horror; it is not one that I wish to contemplate, consider, or even entertain, however briefly. And the Son willingly gives up his own life. Jesus says in John 15, "Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends." And yet, Jesus laid down his life not only for his friends, but also for his enemies! God's sacrifice rolls together two of the greatest sacrifices that anyone could possibly imagine; it could not have been greater.

The other side of this is the reason this sacrifice was necessary in the first place. Bishop Curry was right when he said that Jesus "sacrificed his life, for the good of others, for the good of the other, for the wellbeing of the world...for us."

This is true, but there is more to it. John makes it clear that our sins—in other words, our wrongdoing, our pride, our malice, our selfishness, our ingratitude, and all the things that they entail—made God’s sacrifice necessary. God loves us even though we are not especially loveable. God loves us even those who do not believe in him, those who do not like him, even those who see themselves as his sworn enemies. As Luke said last Sunday, this love extends to all of humanity, even to a certain politician with bad hair who has said some rather nasty things about our nation. As Paul writes, “But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Rom 5:8).

This is the love that John is referring to; a love that sacrifices everything, even for those who don’t deserve it. God is love, and he demonstrates it by his actions. “Beloved, since God loved us so much,” John writes, “we also ought to love one another.” In light of God’s radical love for us, we cannot, we must not, withhold our love from God’s people, from one another. We cannot even withhold it from those who are not yet God’s people, because God loves even those who are opposed to him. What will this look like? Last year I preached a sermon series on the fruit of the Spirit. Just in case your memory doesn’t extend to sermons I preached several months ago, “the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control” (Gal 5:22). All these things stem from love. And, as Paul writes, love “rejoices in the truth.” God

loves us in spite of our sin, not because of it. So we too cannot affirm behaviour that violates God's good intentions for us as human beings, but we can love people in spite of the sinful things that they do. We can have patience with them, overlooking their insults, repaying ill-treatment with kindness, and, for our part, being faithful and consistent in looking out for their best interests.

Next John reiterates some of the things he has already touched on earlier in his letter. Namely, the fact that John and the other apostles are witnesses to the fact that "the Father sent his Son to be the Savior of the world" and that those who abide or live in God acknowledge that Jesus is his Son. After reviewing these truths, John draws the conclusion, "And so we know and rely on the love God has for us." It is a wonderful thing to be able to rely on love. I'm not talking about relying on someone always feeling a certain way, but someone who consistently and actively cares for you. Someone who is consistently kind, patient, and faithful. We can rely on God's love because he is love; love makes up his very nature, it is who he is.

John moves from here to somewhere that might surprise us if we have not been thinking about God's truth and justice operating alongside of his love. In passing, John refers to God's day of judgement. He also tells us that "fear has to do with punishment." While God is love, it is also true, as John says in the first chapter of his letter, that God is light. It is because he is love and light that he

cannot leave us as we are. Our sin, our hatred and darkness, alienate us from God and from one another. Jesus sacrifice was not only to turn aside God's anger against sin, but to rescue us from our sin, to cleanse us from it. Once again, God does not get angry just for the sake of it, but rather because he loves his creation and his creatures. Just as we feel anger when we see injustice and evil in the world around us, so does God. And one day enough will be enough. God will bring the cosmic play of humanity and the powers that be to a conclusion. There will be a day of reckoning. As Peter tells us, God "is not slow in keeping his promise"—his promise to bring evil and injustice to an end—"as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance" (2 Pet 3:9).

But this day of judgment need hold no terror for us. "God is love," John writes. "Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in them. This is how love is made complete among us so that we will have confidence on the day of judgment: In this world we are like Jesus." Once again, John is telling us that we should look to the fruit of our relationship with God—a relationship that begins with accepting Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour—as evidence that we belong to him. We are to be like Jesus in our daily lives. We should emulate the relationship he had with God the Father while he was on earth. Jesus was always worshipful, but he did not approach God in servile fear; he was the Son of God. As children of God, we too

should be worshipful—we should have the reverent sort of fear recorded in both the Old and the New Testaments—yet we should also be confident. As the author of Hebrews writes, “Let us then approach God’s throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need” (Heb 4:16). “There is no fear in love,” John continues, “But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has nothing to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love.” The sort of fear that John writes of is not the fear of the Lord that is the beginning of wisdom according to the book of Proverbs, but the sort of fear of an employee who has been slacking on the job or doing something worse, or the sort of fear a deserter has in war time. John wants us to know that we belong to God as his children, rather than his temporary staffing.

Our Scripture reading for today closes with John once again making it clear that we are to love one another. We can see one another, talk to one another with our voices and hear one another, and touch one another. If we cannot love the ones in front of us, we cannot love God, who is Spirit. Loving God always entails loving his people.

So, after the service is done, get out there and love one another! Don’t love like the world loves; love like God loves. Find confidence in the ways God is working through you to love one another—these are indications that you belong to him. Don’t live in fear of God’s judgment; he has given us all he could have given

to deliver us from his anger against our sin and to purify us, to make us like Jesus.

In light of his amazing love, let us love each other without exception, showing that we belong to him. Amen.

ANNOUNCEMENT:

After a great deal of prayer, counsel, thought, and discussion, I have decided to resign from my present interim position. I realize this will come as a shock and even a disappointment to many of you. It was not an easy decision to make. Over the past nearly seven years at Mission Baptist Church, we have been blessed by good teaching, hospitality, and love. This past Sunday we candidated at Oyen Evangelical Missionary Church of Canada in Oyen, Alberta and the members voted unanimously to accept me as their new pastor.

My family and I have made good friends here who will be difficult to leave. You have shared our joy in the birth of our children, the completion of my degree, and many other delights and trials. And we have come to care for you a great deal.

When our family was not close at hand, you stepped in and filled that void through your love for us and our children. I want you to know our decision to go to Oyen

did not stem from any sense of resentment on our part or a lack of care on yours. I have a good relationship with the elder board and count it a privilege to have worked with them over the past eight months. In making our decision, we had to take into account not only Mission, but other factors outside of Mission affecting our family as well. We will miss all of you very much and we will be praying that God will quickly send you a leader well-equipped to take you into the months and years ahead.

Our girls, Rowenna and Elowen, will have their last Sunday here on July 1st.

Lealla, Nigel, and I will be back for our final Sunday on July 15.