

Preacher: Pastor Twyla

Scripture: 1 John 4:7-21

7-10 My beloved friends, let us continue to love each other since love comes from God. Everyone who loves is born of God and experiences a relationship with God. The person who refuses to love doesn't know the first thing about God, because God is love—so you can't know him if you don't love. This is how God showed his love for us: God sent his only Son into the world so we might live through him. This is the kind of love we are talking about—not that we once upon a time loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as a sacrifice to clear away our sins and the damage they've done to our relationship with God.

11-12 My dear, dear friends, if God loved us like this, we certainly ought to love each other. No one has seen God, ever. But if we love one another, God dwells deeply within us, and his love becomes complete in us—perfect love!

13-16 This is how we know we're living steadily and deeply in him, and he in us: He's given us life from his life, from his very own Spirit. Also, we've seen for ourselves and continue to state openly that the Father sent his Son as Savior of the world. Everyone who confesses that Jesus is God's Son participates continuously in an intimate relationship with God. We know it so well, we've embraced it heart and soul, this love that comes from God.

17-18 God is love. When we take up permanent residence in a life of love, we live in God and God lives in us. This way, love has the run of the house, becomes at home and mature in us, so that we're free of worry on Judgment Day—our standing in the world is identical with Christ's. There is no room in love for fear. Well-formed love banishes fear. Since fear is crippling, a fearful life—fear of death, fear of judgment—is one not yet fully formed in love.

19 We, though, are going to love—love and be loved. First we were loved, now we love. He loved us first.²⁰⁻²¹ If anyone boasts, "I love God," and goes right on hating his brother or sister, thinking nothing of it, he is a liar. If he won't love the person he can see, how can he love the God he can't see? The command we have from Christ is blunt: Loving God includes loving people. You've got to love both.

This morning, we return to the book of First John. At the beginning of April, we read 1 John 1:1-2:2, where John talks about God as the light vs. sin as the darkness; and how we, like Jesus, should follow and share God's light in our daily lives

You may remember that I told you that the John who is given credit for writing this letter was likely Jesus' disciple, "the beloved Disciple." When this letter was written, he was an older man, possibly the only remaining living apostle. It was written before he was exiled to the island of Patmos where it's believed he wrote Revelations. This letter was not directed towards any particular church. It was sent as a pastoral letter to several Gentile churches.

Because John was an eyewitness to Jesus' life, death and resurrection; and an in-person student of Jesus' teachings, he wrote with great authority about Jesus and faithfulness. 1 John was written to reassure Christians in their faith and as a warning against accepting false teachings. John speaks often of love in his writings; therefore, he is often referred to as the apostle of love.

At the beginning of chapter four in first John, John warns against believing everything we hear simply because someone might say their teachings were inspired by God. If we are uncertain or even suspicious of what they are teaching, we need to put their teachings to the test. We should check to see if what they teach aligns with the Bible. We should ask ourselves if they are committed to the body of believers; and is their lifestyle in line with faithfulness to God and Jesus' teachings; and most

importantly, do they believe Jesus is the Son of God, who was fully God and fully human, who lived and died and arose again to save us.

He continues then, knowing the early Christians played a key role in the continuing growth of God's Kingdom, John reminds them, he reminds us, that love needs to be a clear and genuine part of our witness through what we say and how we live. In chapter 4, verse 7, John continues to elaborate on the topic of love. All of us believe that love is important, but many people believe love is about a feeling. However, as Paul says in 1 Corinthians 13:4-7, love is a choice and an action, influencing who we are, and impacting others, either positively or negatively, depending on the choices we make and the actions we carry out.

Clark Cothorn, wrote about this in a story he wrote for the 2000 publication of *Decision*. He wrote, "Gavin and I were helping my pastor guide thirty lively teens through an all-night 'lock-in' at church. Early in the evening, Gavin challenged me to a game of table tennis in the fellowship hall. Our game quickly heated up.

With the score tied and only three points to go before the end of the game, Tracy, an eighth grader, grabbed the ball and kept it from us. My first impulse was irritation. But then a Scripture passage that our group had read that afternoon came to mind: 'Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs.' (This is the Paul text I spoke about a few moments ago.)

Gavin and I joked with Tracy until she finally tossed the ball back onto the table. We thanked her and finished the game.

Hours later, after an evangelistic film, Tracy walked down the aisle with six others to receive Christ as Savior. Later that night, when we gathered for testimonies, Tracy said, 'I grew up in a family where nobody goes to church. I've learned to get attention by making people mad at me. But earlier this evening I saw something different.'

Gavin and I looked at each other and raised our eyebrows. 'When I stole the ball from those guys,' she said, pointing to us, 'they didn't get mad at me. They didn't fight back. I decided right then that I wanted whatever it was they have.'"

Tracy wanted whatever they had. The way the couple reacted to her antics, with a simple loving response, made a huge impact on her decision to follow Jesus. Had they thrown words of anger in her direction, Tracy would have seen them as being no different than anyone else in their response to her.

John calls us to love each other, with Godly love, and not with the notions of love that the world venerates. God's love is different. John tells us as Christians we should have a handle on the nature of God's love, and so then, we have a responsibility to be examples of God's. Christians bring God's love to life. Interestingly, I think people who won't step foot in a church, accusing them of being cold and hypocrites, must know something about God's love.

At the very least they know love, expected to be found in a church, should make Christian responses to their brother and sisters in Christ and others, different. If they see brothers and sisters arguing, demanding their own way, playing favorites, holding grudges; and if visitors feel unwelcomed in a church, they have to wonder why anyone would want to be a part of such an unloving, dysfunctional group.

In verse eight, John says, "The person who refuses to love doesn't know the first thing about God, because God is love—so you can't know him if you don't love." It's important for us to understand first that John says, "God is love;" not love is God.

God is love, in this reading, indicates relationship, the relationship we can have with God. If we seek and have an intimate relationship with God, we are well acquainted with God and His love, so much so that His Spirit lives in us, which means love, God's love, lives in and through us.

In the Gospel reading for today from John 15:1-8, Jesus uses the metaphor of the vine and the branches. Listen to his words: "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine grower. 2 He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. 3 You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. 4 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. 5 I am the vine; you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing."

Using this imagery, we can see how there is a natural flow of love that begins with God, passed onto us through his Son Jesus as we abide in him, passed on then through us to each other as Jesus abides in us, and beyond, even to those who do not know God. Even those we find difficult to love. If this linkage is broken, God's love is missing. That connects with what John says in today's text, when he is forthright in saying that "Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love."

John emphasizes that God is the initiator of love. He doesn't love us based on whether we love Him. God loves everyone and desires for all to have a relationship with him so to know of and experience his amazing love. Evidence of his loving us is greatest through the sacrifice of his one and only Son, Jesus, for the forgiveness of our sins, saving us. What Jesus did for us, gives us life. This shows us God's amazing love. This is a deep expression of God's love, telling us he wants to unburden us of our sin, freeing us to his life-giving peace and joy.

It stands to reason then that our love for others should demonstrate our gratitude to God for His immeasurable love for us; and our love for others should, like God's love for us, also be life giving. We might deem ourselves to be failures or lacking the ability to love as God loves. Indeed, we are not perfect, but we are redeemed.

If our failures to love make us fearful of our future with God, we once again need to remind ourselves of God's love for us, confess our weaknesses and failures, and throw fear aside by choosing to call on and welcome God's help to love, even those most difficult to love. God's love achieves its goal by giving us confidence that we are forgiven and can, with his help share his love.

John sums up this section of his letter by writing, "If anyone boasts, 'I love God,' and goes right on hating his brother or sister, thinking nothing of it, he is a liar. If he won't love the person he can see, how can he love the God he can't see? The command we have from Christ is blunt: Loving God includes loving people. You've got to love both."

We pass on God's love, in part because we want others to experience God's love, commune with God in that experience, and continue to pass it on, so the whole world will know and walk in God's love.

The owner of a drive-through coffee business in Portland, Oregon, was surprised one morning when a customer not only paid for her mocha but also for the mocha of the person in the car behind her. The owner smiled as she told the next customer her drink had already been paid for.

The second customer was so pleased that she bought coffee for the next customer. This string of kindness – one stranger paying for the mocha of the next customer – continued for two hours and twenty-seven customers.

That's how it is with God's love. It starts with his unexpected love for us, which is passed on to others, who in turn pass it on.

Let's keep it going. Pass on God's love. Amen.