

FIRST LESSON: John 15:1-8
SECOND LESSON: 1 John 4:16b-21
April 28, 2024

“Connected to God and One Another”

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Love, love and more love. By the time we have finished reading these two passages the one word that should be echoing in our ears is love. Yet what exactly is this illusive thing called love? Can we touch love? Can love push a car down the road or heat a house? Is love like electricity able to power lights and computers? Is love able to lift heavy objects? For all that we talk about love, what exactly is it? An emotion? A force? A decision?

Love (and hate for that matter) seems to dwell in the interconnectedness between human beings. In this form it is emotion, often driven by body chemistry. We experience the love of a parent for a child or between romantic partners, and thanks to modern science we do know that much of this is dependent upon physical things like hormones and other complex biological markers. But God’s love, or agape love, transcends these forms of love. God’s love is not self-interested. It is pure beneficence. God’s love has more in common with a decision than a feeling. A feeling may or may not accompany it, but feelings are not the driving force behind agape love.

It is very likely that the letter of John we read today was written to a congregation founded by John and emersed in the teachings of John’s gospel. The letter reinforces and brings up a lot of the same imagery found in the gospel of John. But letters to churches were always written with a purpose in mind, and if a letter is saying to us that we ought to love one another, chances are really good that that was not happening. A parent doesn’t tell a child to do something they are already doing. I never once told my kids to brush their teeth if they had already done it. I didn’t say, “Stop hitting your brother,” if that wasn’t happening. The only reason to tell people to love one another is because they are not doing it.

I John is pretty direct: “We love because he first loved us. Whoever claims to love God yet hates a brother or sister is a liar. For whoever does not love their brother and sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen. And he has given us this command: Anyone who loves God must also love their brother and sister.”

Apparently, there were people in this congregation who hated their brothers and sisters in Christ! And the letter of I John is calling them out on it. To claim to worship and love God while putting other members of the body of Christ down and rejecting them does not go together.

We all have difficult people in our lives. They are in our families, our neighborhoods, and even in our congregations. There are a lot of people who we just do not naturally jell with. It takes work. Sometimes it is easy to love our sisters and brothers in Christ. Sometimes we happen to get along fine. But there is always that someone who rubs us the wrong way. Personalities clash. People say things we find offensive. They get on our last nerve. And here's the uncomfortable part. Just as we may have trouble with others, it's a guarantee that others will have trouble with us. We don't like to think about that part. We imagine ourselves to be perfect and everyone else is the problem. But sadly, instead of persevering through and learning to love one another when problems arise, most people just leave. This even happens at a corporate level. I learned recently of a 5-mile square area with about 75 churches. Why so many? Because a lot of them split off from other existing congregations when they had a disagreement! We should not be mirroring the world in its brokenness. We should be transforming the world and creating genuine, loving community, a community that acknowledges differences but still chooses love.

About 40 million Americans have left their churches or faith communities in the last 25 years. That is a staggering number. It's been called "the great dechurching." But unlike that 5-mile area, most of the time individual people leave it is not for any drastic reason. There are people who leave because they are hurt or offended, but there are also far more who leave because they moved and never found a new congregation, or their job made it difficult, or family pressures or circumstances changed. Our society no longer makes church attendance easy for people. When I was growing up everything was shut on Sunday. Now everything happens on Sunday. And if people don't have a strong sense of belonging or community, they will drift. Without love, without real, genuine, communal love, the church dies.

Our primary connection is to God. Jesus said, "I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. If you do not remain in me, you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers." Our problem is that as a culture we have become so individualistic we don't see the whole picture. We are connected to God and that is all that seems to matter. We forget that we are all part of the same living vine. Each branch is connected to the same source and to each other. We share the same life.

As we look around on a Sunday morning, evidence of the great dechurching is everywhere. The harsh reality is, Penn Wynne cannot keep going with such small numbers indefinitely. The money will run out. On our current trajectory if we keep going the way we are we will be closed in five years. That, however, is not inevitable. I hope to see the vast majority of the congregation at our first Project Regeneration meeting on Monday, June 3 at 7. We will be gathering to begin the process of discerning God's will and seeking guidance for our future. Before we even begin Project Regeneration, however, in the middle of May on Pentecost Sunday we are going to do something different. We're going to include a time of silent prayer. We are all going to ask for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on this church. Where we start today and right now, however, is with love.

It sounds paradoxical, but what God wants us to do is love one another. The Holy Spirit dwells within each one of us. The power to love is there if the heart is willing. What people need is genuine love, a love that is willing to be inconvenienced, a love that will take a phone call late at night, a love that will just sit with one who mourns without having any answers. Society is fractured into increasingly isolated groups. People are lonely. Instead of bringing us together the internet has separated us, and politics has replaced religion. There are very few places left that draw together people from every economic, social, cultural and political background, and the church is one. We are together because we are united in Christ, not brought together by an online algorithm. And the one thing that should distinguish the church above all else is unconditional love and grace.

There is a story about a church that had fallen upon hard times. Only five members were left: the pastor and four others. All were over 60 years old. The older I get the younger that sounds.

In the mountains near the church lived a retired bishop. It occurred to the pastor to ask the bishop if he could offer any advice that might save the church. The pastor and the bishop spoke at length, but when asked for advice, the bishop simply responded by saying, "I have no advice to give. The only thing I can tell you is that the Messiah is one of you."

The pastor returned to the church and told the church members what the bishop had said. In the months that followed, the old church members pondered the words of the bishop. "The Messiah is one of us?" they each asked themselves. As they thought about this possibility, they all began to treat each other with extraordinary respect on the off chance that that one among them might be the Messiah. And on the off, off chance that each member himself might be the Messiah, they also began to treat themselves with extraordinary care.

As time went by, people visiting the church noticed the aura of respect and gentle kindness that surrounded the five old members of the small church. Hardly knowing why, more people began to come back to the church. They began to bring their friends, and their friends brought more friends. Within a few years, the small church had once again become a thriving church.

Now while I have a theological problem with identifying anyone other than Jesus as the Messiah, each one of us is filled with the Holy Spirit. God dwells in us. Not only that, but Christ died for each and every one of us. We are cherished by God, and as a result we should cherish one another. So let us begin with love. In whatever direction God is leading us, we know that love will be at the center of God's plan. Amen.

John 15:1-8

15 "I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. **2** He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful. **3** You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. **4** Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No

branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me.

⁵ “I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. ⁶ If you do not remain in me, you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. ⁷ If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. ⁸ This is to my Father’s glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.

1 John 4:16b-21

¹⁶ And so we know and rely on the love God has for us.

God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in them. ¹⁷ 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. ¹⁸ There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love.

¹⁹ We love because he first loved us. ²⁰ Whoever claims to love God yet hates a brother or sister is a liar. For whoever does not love their brother and sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen. ²¹ And he has given us this command: Anyone who loves God must also love their brother and sister.