

What's Love Got to Do with It?

1 John 4:7-21

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“Since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another.” Other than Easter, it's been awhile since we've been in person, so I thought I would start us off with an easy one. “God is love.” Really, is there any more I need to say? That statement is simple, succinct, and fits easily on a bumper sticker. I'm tempted to just say, “That's it!” and sit down, but other than Easter it's been so long since I've been able to preach to real people that I'm not going to throw away this opportunity. We've missed you!

I also can't stop here because that statement isn't as simple as it seems. “God is love. Because God loves us so much, we should love one another.” Sounds so easy, right? But if it were, everyone would be doing it. And yet, when we look around our world, love seems like a precious commodity, harder to find than toilet paper at the beginning of a pandemic. Remember those days? The command in John's letter is simple: God loves you, you love others. So, why are we so terrible at doing this?

It's tempting to want to exempt yourself here, to say that other people may not love with God's love but you do because you're a good person and all. But we have to be willing to situate ourselves in the context of Christian history, in which those of us who profess faith in Christ have fallen far short of this command. Listen to what author Phillip Gulley says: “For many, religion is how we decide who to love and who to hate.” As a loving Christian, I want to argue with him, but history shows otherwise. In fact, here's a very unscientific list of the people I know who have been hated in the name of religion: the pagans, the Samaritans, the Jews, the Muslims, women, Protestants, the Jews again, divorced people, indigenous people, the Muslims again, people who dare to translate the Bible into English, the Jews again, black people, people who dance and play cards, homosexuals, people of a different political persuasion, and lets go ahead and throw the Jews and Muslims in there one more time. History shows that Christians have a poor record of finding motivation for loving these people, but have found ample reasons – based in scripture – for hating them.

What we need to name today is that any justification for hating someone that is rooted in scripture is sinful, because the Bible is clear throughout that hate has no place in God's kingdom. Instead, God's kingdom is characterized as a place where love abounds. In fact, the Bible goes even further than that, as we heard in today's scripture. It doesn't say God is loving, which of course God is. It doesn't say God loves, which of course God does. It says God is love. So if God is love, and we are created in the image of God, then that means we are created to love. Wow, have we messed that up or what? Maybe that's because we don't know what Godly love is. So let's see if John can help us here.

John, wrote his gospel around the year 90 to a specific congregation. John had given birth to this church, but it was struggling to weather external attacks from the Jewish and pagan leaders and internal undermining from false teachers. Sensing that division was going to destroy his church, John wrote three letters of explanation and clarification, which are the three letters of John at the end of the New Testament. One of the things John is addressing is the hateful discourse coming from the mouths of the false teachers, who were trying to split the church and draw people away from the congregation. They were encouraging people to hate those not like them. Good thing we don't do that anymore, right? John is basically saying to his faithful

community that they should test the words of this divisive group by using the measure of love. Is what they say loving? Are they demonstrating love in their actions? If not, then they are not of God, because God is love.

What kind of love is this of which John speaks, mentioning it 28 times in this passage? The Greek word for love here is *agape*. *Agape* is a selfless, other-focused love that represents love in its highest form. When Jesus speaks of the love God has for him, it is *agape* love. In fact, John opens this passage by calling his readers, "Beloved." The Greek word is *agapetoi*. We are *agaped* by God, and called to *agape* God and others.

So what separates *agape* love from the other types of love we experience in our lives? Is it possible to *agape* ice cream? Can we *agape* our favorite sports team? I thought the highest form of love that existed was the way I feel about barbeque, but apparently not. I can't *agape* a good smoked brisket. So what is *agape* love, this love that defines who God is and how God feels about us?

Well, it's not something we're born with. I had a great discussion once with a small group about whether or not we're born with love, or just the ability to love. We concluded that we're born with the need to survive, and must learn to love, which often calls us to do things that go against our survival, like sharing our resources or making ourselves vulnerable. We are not born with *agape* love in our DNA. We are born with the capacity to love, just as we are born with the capacity to hate.

So where does *agape* come from? Simple. We learn to love by being loved, just like we learn to hate by being hated. If our parents show us love and teach us to love others, we are filled with love. And if our parents treat us hatefully and teach us that other people should be hated, we are filled with hate. Both the love we feel and the hate we feel is learned from others, and is a direct result of how we are treated and how we learn that God feels about others, especially those different from us. The people in this world that hate others didn't conjure up that hate on their own. They learned it from someone else, and that hate gets perpetuated down through the generations.

We're not born with *agape*, and we also don't have the capacity to create *agape*, because it didn't come from us to begin with. It's a gift from God, the key word being "gift." There's nothing we can do to earn God's love. Some folks think that's the only way to get it. If you believe the right things or behave the right ways, then God will love you. Some folks believe Jesus died on the cross because God was so mad at us that someone had to be murdered in order to set things right. But that doesn't sound like *agape* to me. Does it to you? We can't earn God's love. It's a gift.

And it's a gift given to everybody. Here's where we humans start to lose the plot. John spells it out pretty plainly: "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." This tells me that love is an action, not something passive, and that love always has to have an object. If you talk about being loving but don't direct that love toward an object, then it's an empty platitude. You can't say you love God and despise or belittle someone, no matter how much you disagree with them. Those two things are diametrically opposed. I would go so far as to say you can't stay silent while people exclaim hate toward others and love God. The opposite of love is not just hate; if love is an action, then it's opposite is also apathy, indifference to the value of others in God's eyes. If we're not speaking up and speaking out to make sure God's love is proclaimed in this world, then we are part of the problem.

You see, *agape* is not just a noun, it's a verb. God's love is something that is not just to be perceived or experienced; it is something to be expressed. It is not only expressed in loving others, it is also expressed in standing up to those who promote hate. Love in action is the most faithful way to counter the hate we see around us. Remember what John says: "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." We most beautifully and perfectly represent Jesus in this world when we love each other.

That's a tall order, right? It's up to us for God's love to be perfected? And this is written by a man who, just a one chapter before, calls his opponents "children of the devil." That's not very loving! Even John can't get this exactly right. The truth is I can never love like God loves, because God loves people that I don't want to love. But *agape* calls me out of my comfort zone, out of my cushy, insulated world of people who are just like me, into a world where I am challenged to show love for those whom I'd just as soon ignore, dismiss, even write off as children of the devil. Hey, the Bible never says this faith thing was going to be easy.

There's so much more that could be said about this, but here is what I want to say today. You are loved. You are loved. No qualifiers, no conditions. You may not always feel loveable or act loveable, but that doesn't stop God from loving you. You are made in God's image, God is love, so you are loved. But that sentence isn't complete until we add that you are also called to love others. We talk a lot about love. Love is at the core of our belief in Jesus Christ. But the real question is, "Do we show love toward people in real-life ways that help them understand that God loves them, too?" We're all human, so we all have limits to our love. God is calling us to push those limits beyond our comfort zone, to love those we'd rather hate.

One final quote, again from Phillip Gulley: "We don't need to accept Jesus into our hearts; we need to have the same heart as Jesus." We can make up all kinds of reasons why it's OK to hate someone else, even saying we hate them because they hate others. But isn't that the same thing as perpetuating the hatred we hate in the first place? We have to start here, at the heart of Jesus, at the heart of our faith. We have to stand up against anyone who claims that hate is a part of faith. We have to lift up our voices on behalf of those who are silenced by division and conflict. We have to have the courage to say that all people matter to God, especially those who are told they don't matter by others. We have to not only say with our mouths but live out with our hands and feet the most basic, fundamental fact of scripture: "God is love." Dr. King said, "Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that." It's time to stop being silent, it's time to stop being OK with hate existing in this world. God is love. Let's show the world what that looks like.