

Sunday May 30, 2021
 Lesson 13: God is Love
 Scripture: 1 John 4: 7-21

Context:

As our series concludes the ways God is revealed in holiness, we look at perhaps the most important way God is revealed to humanity. Today's lesson comes from the New Testament in the book of First John. The purpose of the lesson is to embrace and celebrate God's all-encompassing love.

This scripture passage is one of the most elegant in all the Johannine writings. John begins the text with a focus by naming who God is and what God does. The love is of God and is the basic premise of Christian faith and theology.¹ The integral theological and ethical relationship between indicative (God's love for us) and imperative (our love for others) is the crux of this text.² John will build up the practical implication for the move from the love of God to the love we are to have for one another.

The very first statement asserts how God is love and how this has played out over time. We are to love because God loves us. If a person does not love, it is because they do not know God. God's example of love came to fullest fruition in Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ came to us so that we can live through him. He loved us so much he died for our sins.

This declaration gives a charge to those who say they love and know God. The priority of God's love as the meaning of Jesus' ministry and death is basic to Christian belief and confession.³ Because of the love of Christ, we have been given an opportunity to confession. We can acknowledge we are sinners and we need redemption for how to live.

And here in the text is where we are introduced to the perfecting of love. The Greek word translated "perfected" (*teleioun*) also has the meaning of being brought to completion in the sense of reaching a goal.⁴ Thus, in the Wesleyan tradition we ask candidates in ministry if they expect to be perfected in love in this life. This does not mean that the person will be sinless, but that the individual will strive and reach the goal of loving God and loving others with all their being.

The passage concludes with several admonitions. The first is a counsel to those who say they love God and yet hate others; those do not go together. The second is how God's love and our love for one another cannot be separated. God has given us a way to live and a measure by which we are judged.

¹ D. Moody Smith, "First, Second, and Third John," *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2012), 106.

² *Ibid.*, 111.

³ *Ibid.*, 109.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 110.

Application

The words from First John are some of the most beautiful in scripture. As we read them, we are given both theological and practical application to the Christian faith. God is love, and thus we are called to love each other. John expresses this truth poetically and eloquently.

Yet there is also a tinge of counsel given at the end, which should lead all of us to reflect on the weight of these words. The first is how there is no fear in love as perfect love drives out fear. The person who is afraid has not been made perfect in love. These words should speak loudly into our hearts especially in the climate we find ourselves in today. In the midst of these past fifteen months, we have seen great things to take place in our country, which have also sunk into the communities and churches where we live. We have seen the effects of a global pandemic, political tension in an election year, racial injustice, and denominational strife across several bands of Christianity.

As a result of such things, there has been the spread of fear across the land and into our souls. There is a fear of those who are different, whether it is their external appearance or the thought processes of individuals and groups. It is something, which I think if everyone is honest, can say that we struggle with as individuals. We are afraid of people who are different because it threatens our ways of life. Or we *think* they threaten us. So we bunker down, or we go after others, or we latch onto conspiracy theory after conspiracy theory. We lose our souls to fear and forget about the power of love.

This text reminds us of how love is not always an easy or instantaneous thing. At times, love takes work. We may have assumptions challenged or our world perspectives turned upside down. We might even have to let go of thinking how we are the only ones who know what is best. Those who are strangers to us are the very ones the Lord may be calling us to love and welcome into our hearts.

The second part of this counsel talks about hypocrisy. There are those who may talk of loving God with their whole heart. We may have the perfect attendance record at church. We may know what the Bible says from cover to cover. In our eyes, we know what it means to proclaim Jesus as Savior and can remember the moment we asked Jesus into our heart.

Yet we are also skilled at hating our brothers or sisters in Christ. We may not say it openly and yet we find other ways to do things. We talk over and against them. If we see something they have and we like, we take. We find ways to turn people against each other and somehow think that will make everything better. There are times we make battles not in the name of God, but in the desire we have for power and control. We forget the call and the love God has given us.

If we are honest, we can all admit we have hated others and we have sought to overrun others. We have forgotten the call of our Lord and how we are called to love each other. We have forgotten the good news of Jesus Christ and how he showed us the greatest power of love in his crucifixion, death, and resurrection. God has shown us what love looks like, even as hard as it may be.

Who do you fear and why do you fear them? What does it mean to be made perfected in love? How do you think this change extends not just to clergy, but to all the people of God? What are the ways you have “hated” others? How is God calling you to love and love deeply?

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