

God is Love

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Introduction

When I told her what this week's text was, Sue told me an old story about an old minister who stepped into the pulpit, looked out and delivered his sermon:

Beloved, Let us love one another.

For love is of God, and everyone who loves

Is born of God, and knows God.

The person who refuses to love

Doesn't know God, for God is Love.

Beloved, Let us love one another.

"Thus ends the sermon", he said, smiled and walked back to his chair. The congregation looked around, looked at their watches, happily, then joined in the closing hymn and went home.

The next Sunday, the minister once again stepped into the pulpit, and with a gentle smile began his sermon:

Beloved, Let us love one another.

For Love is of God, and everyone who loves

Is born of God, and knows God.

The person who refuses to love

Doesn't know God, for God is Love.

Beloved, Let us love one another.

And walked slowly back to his chair.

And so it continued for two more weeks! The congregation was abuzz! Was their beloved minister losing his mind? Was he suddenly lazy? Had he lost his zeal for preaching? People were puzzled and some exasperated.

The deacons intervened.

“Brother Jones”, they approached the pastor. “Brother Jones, for four weeks now, you've read the text and sat down. What's going on? People are concerned!”

The pastor responded:

“I've preached the same text for four weeks. When you start doing it, I'll move on to the next!”

If you were to make up a three-word sentence describing God, what would it be? Judaism's three-word sentence from its ancient creed, the *Shema*, would be God is *One*. Islam's three-word sentence from its foundational creed would be: God is *God* (or, God is *Allah*, the Arabic word for God). The writer of I John gives his: God is *Love*.

But what is love? There's the rub. A lot of things that are called love aren't love. And a lot of things that are done in the name of love are not love—sometimes they are the opposite of love.

As much as we all need love, we are all bad at it. We are fools for love, bumblers at love, bargainers for love, withholders of love. Our love is fickle and frail. We are like the sad clown at the circus trying to express love without words, but we stumble over our big feet and our gestures are awkward. Tears run down our white-face make-up.

But love is what moves the sun and the stars, as Dante put it. Love is as essential to life as bread and water. We were born from love, by love, and love is what makes us whole and alive.

II

This kind of love, John says, is the love that comes from God. The lead off theme of this passage is: *Love is from God who is love*.

Beloved, let us love one another
because love is from God;
everyone who loves is born of God
and knows God.

Earlier in the epistle he wrote:

See what love the Father has given us
—love as if from another country—that
that we should be called the children of God,
and indeed we are! (3:1)

We are begotten in love. Love is our original self. We have come from love and
love is where we will at the end return.

Why do we love, and how do we love? John puts it in these simple words:
“We love because God first loved us.” (4:19).

Wendell Berry puts it exquisitely in this poem which is also a prayer:

I know that I have life
only insofar as I have love.

I have no love
except it come from Thee.

Help me, please, to carry
this candle against the wind.¹

III

The second theme of the passage is: *The God of love abides in us as love:*

God is love,
and the one who abides in love
abides in God, and God abides in them

Such love is more than a simple human possibility. Paul says God's love is *poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit* (Romans 5:5). Love is also a river, a flowing stream within us. The spiritual life is connecting with that deep river of love and life.

God takes up abode in us, and love takes up residence in us. We move from a House of Fear to a House of Love. As John says, "Perfect love casts our fear." (4:18).

As God abides in us, love abides in us.

I know that I have life
only insofar as I have love

I have no love
except it come from Thee.

Help me, please, to carry
This candle against the wind.

IV

The third theme makes the vital connection between the love of God and love of neighbor—as Jesus did as he formed the Greatest Commandment from two Hebrew commandments. the love of God with all our heart, mind, soul and strength, and the love of our neighbor as ourselves.

It is the meaning of the New Commandment Jesus gave to his disciples and to us:

A new commandment I give you

That you love one another.

Just as I have loved you,

you also should love one another.

By this everyone will know that you are my disciples,

if you have love for one another. (John 13: 34-5)

Not right doctrine! Right loving.

And this is the meaning of the Golden Rule: “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” Or, as Wendell Berry paraphrases it: “Do unto those downstream as you would have those upstream do unto you.” The *Koran’s* version of the Golden Rule is: “No one has faith until they love for others what they love for themselves.”

John puts the matter clearly and sharply:

If anyone boasts, “I love God” while continuing to hate their brothers and sisters, they are liars.

Or, as I would put it: They make themselves liars. We can sing *Amazing Grace* without really trusting in it. We can sing *Love is the Theme*, but our life together can display a lack of it.

John is talking about love so much because there is a growing rift in the Johannine church and that there’s a group threatening to secede from the church to start a new, purer church. “We love God more than you!”

The proof of the pudding is that we love not just in word but also in deed. Love of God and love of one another are an indivisible whole.

John puts it this way.

No one has ever seen God.
If we love one another
God abides in us
and God's love is perfected in us.

And then he draws the conclusion:

For those who do not love
their brothers and sisters whom they have seen
cannot love God whom they have not seen. (4:20)

How do you love the God you can't see? Love people you can see!

V

So again what is love? When the young Stephen Sondheim was writing the lyrics for Leonard Bernstein's *West Side Story*, Bernstein challenged him: Write a love song for Tony to sing without using the word "love". And he wrote the famous love song, "*Maria*".

I don't know that I could preach a sermon on love without using the word "love". Sometimes the word gets in the way. Addie in William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* says: "Words are no good...[they] don't ever fit what they are trying to say at." So instead of using the word love, let's look at Jesus in action:

He ate and drank with outcasts and sinners and welcomed them and us into the kingdom of God. Love as glad welcome.

He set people free from what oppressed them. Love as rescue.

He took a towel and washed feet. Love as service.

He healed and made people whole. Love as Healing.

He forgave sins. Love as forgiveness.

He gave people worth and dignity by the way he treated them. Love bestows worth.

Jesus prayed for his enemies. Love has no bounds.

He refused to return evil for evil. Love doesn't strike back.

And finally, he gave his life for us on the cross. John puts it this way: "Loving us, he loved us to the end." He poured his life out for us, for that is what love is, a self-expending love. And not just on the cross, but his whole life long.

And *more* finally: God raised him from the dead to give us a glimpse of the final triumph of love. So we can be part of love's little triumphs here and now, little daily resurrections. Love finally wins!

One more thing about God's love that we see in Jesus' life: *God loves in weakness*, as we all love in weakness. We cannot save those we love from harm and hurt. We can only love them always, without end. The *Abba* of Jesus did not save Jesus from his death on a cross, even as Jesus prayed to his *Abba* for that.

The *Abba* of Jesus loves in weakness, which means sometimes it becomes a suffering love. The *Abba* of Jesus gives us the terrible and real freedom to do right or wrong, good or ill. And thus also to be harmed by the wrong of others. But *Abba's* love will never fail. It abides forever. It works in all things for our good. It is a love that never lets us go.

God is Love.

I know that I have life
insofar as I have love.

I have no love
except it come from Thee.

Help me, please, to carry
This candle against the wind.

Amen

1. Wendell Berry, *Leavings* (Berkeley, Counterpoint Press, 2010), p. 33.