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1 John 4:7-21

As we continue in our series on 1st John we come to chapter four, the love chapter. Well, actually this chapter is just a continuation of the same themes we have already studied in this letter from John. Last week we looked at chapter three as we were challenged to embrace the truth that we are God's beloved. Beloved in birth. Beloved in life. Beloved in death. Beloved in resurrection.

So today we hear these familiar words about love. Love, love, love, love, love, love, love. At this point in our study of 1st John we might want to say, "Okay, John, we get it! God loves us, so we are to love others." Or say, "Dear John, you're sounding like a broken record on this whole topic of love. Seriously? You need to really say it all again, and again, and again?!"

Well you are not alone if you grew tired of hearing the word love while Jim was reading the scripture passage. And to reassure you, you were not going crazy, it really does say love that many times! Too much love. In fact the "verb to love (agapao) is used twenty-eight times in 1st John, and *eighteen* of those occurrences are in this unit (of chapter four verse seven through chapter five verse five). Additionally, the noun love (agape) is employed *thirteen* times here, with an additional five occurrences in the rest of the letter. Clearly, love is a central theme in these verses."¹ Maybe we want to join Tina Turner in asking, "What's love got to do with it?"

Now, I must confess that a couple months ago when it was determined that we would spend these weeks studying 1st John my initial response was very positive. I see many things we can glean by staying with an extended passage over multiple weeks. In addition it is a short and accessible book. Skimming through it I was reminded right away of this overarching, pervasive theme of love. At the time I thought: "This is great! A sermon series on love sounds appealing

and engaging and relatively straight forward. You know, none of that heavy theology with big words that no one can pronounce let alone articulate. Love: sounds delightful.”

Well, are you familiar with the phrase don't talk too soon? While on one hand I still deeply resonant with my initial reaction, on the other hand I found this sermon prep and writing to be much more difficult than initially anticipated. Why? Well, what is love? How do you describe it? Isn't it really gray and open to be negotiated as to what it really means... what it really is or is not? How can we understand love when it is so distorted and abused by our media and culture? I fought the temptation to just say well let's flip back in our Bible to Deuteronomy and talk about one of the other commandments... maybe the one that says do not steal, or be sure to observe the Sabbath, or do not covet your neighbors spouse or property. But then wait, if we are willing to dig below the surface those commandments are also a little sketchy on details and have the potential to provide just as many questions as to how to know if we are faithfully living them out.

Several weeks ago on Holy Humor Sunday Phil Habecker preached on the first chapter of 1st John. Within that sermon he reminded us of the significance of reading the Gospel of John alongside of 1st John. In his sermon he highlighted some the similarities between the two texts including vocabulary, sentence structure, and overall themes. Well today I would reiterate Phil's message again. As we read 1st John we might naively assume that this is the first time John has talked about this commandment to love God and love others. However, simply revisiting the gospel of John we quickly realize that oh no, this is a central theme to John's approach and interpretation of Jesus and what it means to follow after him.

In 1st John, John continues to articulate his concern that followers of Jesus understand how “religious experience, theology, and ethics are interconnected.”ⁱⁱ Now this might sound very

familiar to you because this concern has also historically been extremely important to Anabaptists and Mennonites. So, for example, while the other Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke

briefly depict the Last Supper, John devotes five chapters (John 13-17) to this event, distinct with a lengthy farewell address. In these chapters Jesus essentially focuses on instructing his followers how to live once he departs. He models that they are to serve one another as the footwashing scene implies. They are commanded to love one another. He promises to send the Holy Spirit to teach them and empower their lives for the gospel. Finally, he prays that the Christian community may be unified.ⁱⁱⁱ

So, love is not a new concept to dear John. In fact 1st John becomes an opportunity to reiterate again, and again, and again, a theological and ethical grounding that was already highlighted in the Gospel of John. To illustrate this turn with me to the Gospel of John, chapter thirteen beginning in verse thirty four. There we read:

³⁴ “A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. ³⁵ By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.”

Hmmm... sounds a lot like 1st John. Love, love, and more love. Now perhaps you are scratching your head and saying to yourself, “I’m pretty sure that this commandment about love is actually something that sounds really familiar, something like I’ve already read in the Bible.” Well if that was you I would tell you that you are correct! If you turned back to Deuteronomy chapter six you would find the very familiar and powerful Shema. John, as well as Jesus and all of his followers, would have been very familiar with this text that would have resided deep within the core of their beings. This text commanded them to love God with all their heart, soul, and strength. Then if we turned to Leviticus chapter nineteen we would read the commandment that they would have also been familiar with: love their neighbors as themselves. In addition

within Leviticus the term of neighbor is quite broad as it is stressed that neighbor includes the widow, the orphan, and the foreigner in their midst.

So this is not a new commandment, new teaching, or new concept. Jesus' disciples would have already been familiar with this commandment to love God and love others. We clearly know that this is not the first time it is addressed in 1st John. So seriously, why so much about love? Too much love, if you ask me! It is like we are experiencing collective déjà vu. Been there. Heard that. Got the t-shirt. Moved on. And so then we have to ask ourselves, why? Why does John return to the subject of love time and time again?

One could make the claim that love is where it all begins. Or perhaps it could be explained that we keep returning to love because as one writer reminds us, "We never get beyond God's love for us in Christ and how that is lived out in love for one another. We are always drawn back to that central, and centering, claim."^{iv}

Ah, so maybe we need to alter the sermon title, or at least add on to it. So too much love question mark not possible. And yet how do we do love, and what does it really mean in daily life?

This week I appreciated learning an insight offered from one of our Anabaptist biblical scholars, Willard Swartley. As Swartley reflects on this theme of love he offers that "The usual translation is too weak"^v with the usual translation being: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. Swartley reminds us that "Jesus is not just a model of the past to be limited. (Instead) The command(ment) also makes Jesus' love contemporary, empowering believers to love, then and now. (So Swartley offers) A better translation (one that) stresses this: love one another with the love with which I have loved you. This expresses the continuing relationship between Jesus and the believers."^{vi}

Love one another with the love with which I have loved you. I don't know if you are like me, but when as I allow those words to settle into my soul I find myself releasing a breath I didn't realize I was holding. I release the breath as I think, hallelujah, it isn't just about me. Hallelujah I only need to be a conduit for Jesus' love. I don't have to fabricate it, come up with it, manufacture it, I only need to pass it on. And I am breathing deeply, feeling grateful, feeling relieved, feeling good, really, really good. And then the words sink in. *Love one another with the love with which I have loved you.* Hmm... *with the love with which I have loved you.* Oh no.

Oh no, for you see Jesus has loved me with a love that is unconditional, self-sacrificing, empowering, full of hope, a love that offers redemption and second and third and eightieth do overs. This love with which I have been loved is a love that loves amidst my imperfections, in spite of my shortcomings, in fact this is the love that says you are mine and I love you. No strings attached. I'm starting to wish that the commandment instead had been "Love is a good thing. You should try it sometime. Look for ways to incorporate it as a side gig in your life." But Jesus says by this, how we love each other, everyone will know that we are followers of Jesus.

John reminds us in the gospel as well as in 1st John that this kind of love is only possible if we stay connected to Jesus through the Spirit. If we try to love on our own strength, on our own accord, on our own will - we will fail. Sure, we might love some others well, but inevitably we will hit our wall, or build our wall, and say we have loved enough. Too much love. It is only by staying connected to Jesus that his love is able to flow through us to the world around us. But, even saying that, it still begs for us to allow ourselves to be pruned. To allow the Holy Spirit, which is talked about in this passage, to hold up a mirror and lead us in reflecting on where we have withheld God's love to ourselves, where we have engaged in being judgmental, or where we have deemed that someone else is simply not worthy of our love or God's. Now don't feel

too smug looking at those around you and know with confidence that this sermon is for them. Oh no. This sermon is for each and every one of us gathered here today.

So, what does this love look like? Well to answer that we need to look at what we know about God's love revealed through Jesus. I would say that to love with the love we have been loved with then we love who Jesus loved. Who did Jesus invite to his table? I think we are to invite them to ours. Who did Jesus reach out to, befriend, equip, touch? We are to do the same. What are the attributes of Jesus' love? What disclaimers, if any does he tack on to his love? Our love should illuminate his attributes and only include disclaimers that Jesus incorporated.

Jesus' love took him to the cross. Where does our love take us? Does our love take us to comfort, safety, judgement... does it take us to the cross? If we are thinking too hard I think we are missing the point. If we are trying to justify why we do not or cannot or will not love someone or a group of people or a nation of people, we are missing the point.

I don't know about you, but let me confess that I have done a really good job of putting limitations on God's love. Sometimes for myself, and even more often for others. However I need to be reminded that worthiness has no prerequisite. Of course we are thankful to hear that, at least for ourselves. The challenge is to live into Jesus' commandment and not live like there are prerequisites for God's love, and therefore consequently for ours. By our love everyone will know that we are his disciples.

To love with the love of Jesus means that we stay connected through the Spirit and seek to become more and more like Jesus. As we grow into the likeness of Jesus we will also grow in our ability, desire, and willingness to love like Jesus loved and to love whom he loved. This week it is my heart's prayer, mine, Cynthia Elaine Wiltheiss Voth, that I might be faithful to the command: *Love one another with the love with which Jesus has loved me.* And as one of your

pastors I also pray that we will each grow in our understanding and faithfulness to this command: Love one another with the love with which we have been loved. And it all begins by naming, claiming, and celebrating the amazing love of God – the place where it all begins.

By God's grace, through God's love, may it be so.

ⁱ J.E. McDermond, *Believers Church Bible Commentary: 1, 2, 3 John* (Herald Press: Harrisonburg, Virginia), 223.

ⁱⁱ McDermond, *John*, 235.

ⁱⁱⁱ McDermond, *John*, 235.

^{iv} Brian Peterson, Commentary on 1 John 4:4-21,

https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1288

^v Willard Swartley, *Believers Church Bible Commentary: John* (Herald Press: Harrisonburg, Virginia), 327.

^{vi} Swartley, *John*, 327.