



Lexington Presbyterian Church

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Unrequited

1 John 4:7-21 & Ephesians 3:14-19
A sermon by William M. Klein

3 September 2017

¹⁴For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, ¹⁵from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name. ¹⁶I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, ¹⁷and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. ¹⁸I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, ¹⁹and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. (Eph. 3:14-19 NRSV)

With our epistle reading we journey into the most profound analysis of Christian love in the New Testament – surpassing even the better known 1 Corinthians 13. As you listen, note that what stands out in this passage is the priority of God's love for us, which makes possible our love for one another.¹

7 Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. 8 Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. 9 God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. 10 In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. 11 Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. 12 No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us. 13 By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit. 14 And we have seen and do testify that the Father has sent his Son as the Savior of the world. 15 God abides in those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God, and they abide in God. 16 So we have known and believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. 17 Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness on the day of judgment, because as he is, so are we in this world. 18 There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. 19 We love because he first loved us. 20 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. 21 The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also. (1 Jn. 4:7-21 NRSV)

1

The church to which John belonged and wrote seems a whole lot like the church of today – perhaps even a tad like the church to which you belong. Some of the faithful of John's church sound as if they are too busy with their own lives to take on the pressing work of the church. Others can't seem to put into actual practice the faith they publicly profess. Some get mad and leave the church.

1

If the text is to be trusted...one of the biggest problems facing John's church was that people were unable to get along with each other. Some members talked bad about other members. Several times throughout the letter we read a variation on the following theme: "Those who say, 'I love God' and hate their brothers or sisters are liars." Love must have been hard to come by. Twenty-nine times in the space of fifteen verses the author used one form or other of the Greek word *agape*.² It was as if to say - "Beloved, let us love one another...for crying out loud."³

Contemporary biblical scholarship is so useful at this point because it gives us a glimpse of the actual community of the early church. We are granted at least partial access to how the earliest Christians made sense of and lived out their faith. What we discover helps us realize the problems we face today are not new. Living out the faith didn't come easily to them either.

Even though bickering, turf wars, and lack of charity also existed in the early church, that doesn't mean we simply throw up our hands and say, "It's always been this way - that's the way it will always be." Rather, there is always an opportunity for us to hear the good news of God's remarkable love for us - and, in gratitude, to become the loving community of God's dreams.

2

The primary question we need to ask is this one. How do we learn about love - and about how to love?

Where we and our ancestors tend to go astray is that we look in the wrong places for an answer. We say the biological family is where we learn about love - where love is experienced, modeled, and nurtured. We say we learn about love from the movie industry or from advertising - that the larger society is the crucible in which attitudes toward love are shaped and lessons learned. We say we learn about love from immersing ourselves in the life of the local church.

It is possible to learn something about love from each of these places. But the answer 1 John offers is that if we look to the family or the larger society or the church, what we learn about love is skewed **unless** it has been shaped by the love of God. John says quite clearly: Love comes from God.⁴

The trouble with any understanding of love that is not grounded in and modeled after God's love for us is that it is based upon *quid pro quo* - "I'll love you if you love me." What we learn from God's love is that God has decided to love us unilaterally - i.e., apart from our ability to reciprocate. God gives us love prior to and independent of any response we might offer. Why does God do this? For no reason other than that kind of love is the very nature of God.⁵

As Sunday school children one of the things we memorized was that we love because God first loved us. We find the clue to that prior love of God most clearly in Jesus. "In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so we might live through him." We know God loved us long before we loved him because he entered our history, came into our world, sat where we sit. The imagination, the concern, the unselfishness, the tenderness that prompts one person to stand in another's shoes, to see the world through another's eyes - that is the very essence of God's love.⁶

Let me give you an example of this type of love. Mamie Mobley was asked if she harbored bitterness toward two white men for the brutal murder of her 14-year-old son in 1955.⁷ This is what she said:

It certainly would be unnatural not to hate them, so I'd have to say I'm unnatural... The Lord gave me a shield, I don't know how to describe it myself... I did not wish them dead. I did not wish them in jail. If I had to, I could take their four little children and I could raise them as if they were my own and I could have loved them... I believe the Lord meant what he said, and try to live according to the way I've been taught.⁸

A love such as this is not our inclination. Or maybe it is our inclination...it is just that we ignore it. Regardless, according to 1 John, unless we are at some level capable of this type of remarkable love, **then we do not know God.**

I'll be the first to admit that love such as this frightens me. I am afraid I would plumb the depths of bitterness toward someone who murdered my son or one of my daughters. I am afraid I would not easily give up my bitterness and hatred toward him or her.

I pray you and I may never face something so terrible. But if I do...I also pray for Mamie Mobley's courage and faith. I pray that I may truly know God in such a way that I can have Mrs. Mobley's type of love that can cast out my fear.

3

The biblical message is realistic enough to acknowledge that human love will probably always be confused and perverted. But if our love is founded upon and modeled after God's love then we have a chance to love one another in ways that are life giving.

The writer of the Epistle of John makes an assumption worth considering. He supposes that we humans are inclined to love one another – that such love is actually what we all desperately want – and that we are as likely as not to be inclined toward a healthy kind of love. The obstacle we run up against, though, is fear.

You and I are afraid of letting ourselves get too close to someone because he or she may let us down, betray us, move away, or die. "I'm never going to let someone get that close to me again," I was told by a woman in tears. "My heart can't stand to be hurt this way again."⁹

There are human fears aplenty that can be set one upon the other as a barrier to love. And, Lord knows, there are loads of reasons not to love. Who among us has not known the gut wrenching pain of loss, rejection, betrayal, or mistaken trust? Who among us would blame Mamie Mobley if she never forgave her son's murderers?

On the other hand, who among us can say life feels good and right when we withhold love – when we harbor bitterness – when we choose to live in such a way that we neither give nor receive love? There is a direct line from such a loveless way of life to the penitentiary, the insane asylum, or the bottle.

4

Al Winn was a Presbyterian pastor, writer, and former Moderator of the Presbyterian Church. Reflecting upon our lesson from 1 John, Dr. Winn was prompted to suggest two questions that could be asked as a part of an ordination service. I think the

two questions would be good to ask as part of confirmation, profession of faith, marriage, or ordination.

The first question is: **Do you know God has loved you?** Have you sensed the sweep and wonder of what happened in Jesus – that God stood in your shoes, that he did not point you out as guilty (which he had every right to do), but identified with you in your guilt?

The second question is this: **Are you trying to find God so you can love him back?** Because if you are, don't look for him to appear to you in some angelic, spiritual form. He will appear to you in "us" – and in those with whom you live and work. God will set himself before you in the stubborn person beside you on the church pew, the meddlesome neighbor, the spoiled child, and the disagreeable office worker. If you cannot see God in the face of your neighbor and learn to love that neighbor, then you do not understand God's love for you. The passage reads, "Those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen."¹⁰ But if you truly understand God's love for you, you will learn to love God back by loving one another.¹¹

Al Winn has proposed two good questions because love one for another is our responsibility as Christians. **To put the matter bluntly – if we do not love one another then we are not Christian.** Loving each other is our way of demonstrating we have been loved by God and that we want to love God back. Our love for one another is also the sure sign of God's continued dwelling among us.¹²

5

As you ponder all of this...be comforted yet again, not by your ability to be loving, but by God's. Never forget that God stands above the trials and complexities of life with wisdom to guide you, strength to protect you, and love to keep you. His boundless and creative love supports you whether you sense it or not. With a surging fullness God is forever moving toward you, seeking to fill your life with the capacity and desire to love as he loves you.¹³

Thanks be to God. Amen.



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Endnotes:

¹ Black, C. Clifton. 1998. 1 John. *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. XII. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 429. We describe the letters of John as *ōpistlesō* but they are technically categorized as catholic of general epistles along with James, 1 and 2 Peter, and Jude.

² The Greek word is .

³ Brosend, Wm. 2000. "Unless someone guides me," in *Christian Century*, May 10. Chicago: Christian Century Foundation, 535.

⁴ Brueggemann, Walter. et. al. 1993. Texts for Preaching: Year B. Louisville: WJK Press, 312.

⁵ Black, 433.

⁶ Gill, Theodore A. ed. 1973. To God Be the Glory. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 124. Quoting Albert Curry Winn, *The Plainest and Simplest Thing in the World*.

⁷ Fourteen-year-old Emmett Louis Till (1941-1955) was visiting relatives in Money, Mississippi, on August 24, 1955, when he was accused of whistling at Carolyn Bryant, a white woman who was a cashier at a grocery store. Four days later, Bryant's husband Roy and his half brother J.W. Milam kidnapped Till, beat him and shot him in the head. The men were tried for murder, but an all-white, male jury acquitted them. See <https://www.biography.com/people/emmett-till-507515>.

⁸ Black, 434. Quoting from Studs Terkel, *Race: How Blacks and Whites Think and Feel About the American Obsession* (NY: New Press, 1992), 21-22.

⁹ This theme is taken up in a sermon I preached August 6, 2017, *Spiritual Hurricane*. See www.lexpres.org.

¹⁰ See 1 John 4:20.

¹¹ Gill, 127. Quoting Albert Curry Winn, *The Plainest and Simplest Thing in the World*.

¹² Black, 430.

¹³ King, Martin L. Jr. 1963. Strength to Love. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 124.