

“Beloved”  
A sermon by the Reverend Joe Genau  
for Edgewood Presbyterian Church  
1 John 4:7-21  
May 6, 2018  
Sixth Sunday of Easter

This is our second straight reading from the letter of 1 John. I explained last week that this letter is written to a Christian community that has had a split. Those who left were focusing exclusively on the divine nature of Christ, pushing aside his humanity. They were losing touch with a tangible, earthly incarnation in favor of a disembodied spirituality. 1 John is written to remind the community that remains that the incarnation is crucial and that it makes life more complicated because with a human Jesus you have to deal with...humans.

Just before this passage, those who teach about this non-fleshy Jesus are described as being “the antichrist” — and 1 and 2 John are the only books of the Bible to use that word. This merely spiritual Jesus teaching is more easily digested than embodiment and sacrifice and the cross, and so the world will prefer it, and so it is against-Christ, a sinister substitute that robs the incarnation of its radical power. And it robs God of God’s love!<sup>1</sup> Listen now to these verses from 1 John:

Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. 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. In this is love, not that we loved God but that God loved us and sent the Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. 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 God’s love is perfected in us. By this we know that we abide in God and God in us, because God has given us of God’s Spirit.

And we have seen and do testify that the Father has sent the Son as the Savior of the world. God abides in those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God, and they abide in God. 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.

Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness on the day of judgment, because as God is, so are we in this world. 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. We love because God first loved us. Those who say, “I love God,” and hate their siblings, are liars; for those who do not love a sibling whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from God is this: those who love God must love their siblings also.

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

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<sup>1</sup> Craig Koester at [https://www.workingpreacher.org/narrative\\_podcast.aspx?podcast\\_id=517](https://www.workingpreacher.org/narrative_podcast.aspx?podcast_id=517)

Those who still watch the national evening news on one of the old networks know what to expect right at the end of the broadcast: a heartwarming report from the heartland about the triumph of American spirit over cynicism in some small town. It's a palate-cleanser for the soul after hearing all that grimy news.

This Friday, the CBS Evening News concluded with such a story, except it wasn't from Nebraska or Oklahoma, but from right here in Birmingham. The story was about four-year old Austin Perine. Austin had been watching a nature show and in the footage, a baby panda was abandoned by his family. Dad, T.J., explained that the poor little panda was now homeless. The never-ending questions of a child of four soon uncovered the fact that there are *humans* who are homeless and hungry. Austin was appalled.

He asked his parents to make a change in family finances. He wanted all of his allowance and any money they'd spend on toys to go to a new project. Once a week, Austin takes that money and goes to a fast-food restaurant and buys as many chicken sandwiches as he can afford. And then he's off to Linn Park or Five Points or near the Firehouse Shelter with his dad to feed as many homeless people as he can find. He wears a blue t-shirt and a red cape and if you ask him what his superhero name is he'll tell you it's "President Austin." His dad says of that alter-ego: "That's his idea of what the president is supposed to do..." With every chicken sandwich handed out, little President Austin offers a reminder: "Don't forget to show love."<sup>2</sup>

Now, I'm not going to deny that Austin has superpowers. He seems like a truly special dude. But we all know that he's not driving himself around town in search of folks to feed. This desire to serve and this yearning to right what is wrong with the world and this message of love he shares did not appear spontaneously in his heart and brain and mouth. This story is as much about Austin's dad as it is about Austin. This child has received love and been taught love, and so he can give love. Fear grows from fear. Disinterest grows from disinterest.<sup>3</sup> Prejudice grows from prejudice. Love grows from love.

There are several things the writer of 1 John wants us to understand about God's over-the-top love, and its origin is one of them. We don't find God through love, we find love through God. It is revealed to us as those who are born of God. God's love comes first and makes possible human love. We don't earn it — by loving God or by loving others. God's love is the baseline, the source, the beginning, the fount of every other love. It is fixed. God's love is the constant in every equation and no enemy, no fiery pulpiteer, no disappointed parent, no false teacher, no scorned lover, no bully, and no law can change that. This love from God does not urge us toward loving. Rather, it makes possible our ability to love. It's not a new suggestion, it's a new possibility.<sup>4</sup>

This letter wants us to see that the purpose of this love is not for it to be hoarded or meted out like rations or claimed with a flag like a parcel of land. The goal of this love is community, it's living life together, it's a life-transforming reality to bring about reality-transforming lives. If we love one

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/austin-perine-alabama-4-year-old-superhero-using-his-power-to-feed-the-homeless/>

<sup>3</sup> David Bartlett at [https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=306](https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=306)

<sup>4</sup> Bartlett

another, God's love finds its completion, its ultimate fulfillment.

If you read this book and live the life of faith, you could say a lot of things about God. God is light. God is with us. God is hope. God is in charge. God is good. God is powerful. God is worried about us messing things up. God is sometimes quiet. God is willing to chase us down and tear apart the sky to get at us. God is really, really worried about folks getting left in the dust in favor of greed. 1 John chooses to sum it all up in "God is love."

We hear that, and there's a temptation to run with it and say, "God is love. And love is God. And so 'God' is just another word for 'love' and I bet if we say that we can get some younger folks in here!" *And so God is love, and love is what makes a Subaru a Subaru, and God is in the Subaru and I love baseball and pizza and God is baseball and God is pizza and pizza is knowledge and I John told me I can eat cold pizza for Sunday morning breakfast and commune with God because God is simply love.*

And we have completely missed the point, wandering off into both the dark recesses of the pastor's REM-cycle and the kind of non-embodied, spiritual-but-not-religious stuff that broke the community in the first place. Love is God's chosen self-definition<sup>5</sup>, but not a sentimental, gently-wafting curtains love. It's a very specific — painfully, sacrificially specific — love.

It's the love revealed in a God who chooses to deal with us at all and who comes to us all vulnerable and human and who arrives in a tiny village in the middle of West Tumbleweed, Israel and who goes looking for those of us that the rest of us are giving the cold shoulder to and who shakes a holy fist at greed and arrogance and self-righteous religiosity and who dies at the hand of political collusion and who rises from the grave and somehow doesn't say "well, that was pretty awful, forget those guys, I'm a'goin' home" but persists in working on us and speaking to us and loving us.

"What did your preacher preach about this morning?" *I know it's a question you get asked a dozen times on a Sunday.* "Love," you'd say today, "and something about pizza?" "Oh, how...original." Love shows up again and again in scripture, along with concern for the poor and not doing stuff that hurts relationships. (Though I guess one might argue that those last two are about love as well.) This isn't because the Bible, or God, or the Presbyterian Church have nothing new to say. It's because God is love and, it seems, we need to be constantly reminded of that. Even when we get it and go on a good run of not forgetting to show love, the world around us changes and we realize we've fallen short of God's perfect love.

There are so many desperately in need of love, more than all the chicken sandwiches in the world plus one. Our job will never be complete. The report card of our love will never be perfect. And yet, we push for more, because love is not abstract, it's palpable. It's not an idea, it's a verb. It is action. It matters, quite literally, to all of our fellow children of God if we can stretch our love just a bit more every day. It matters for their safety — race, religion, gender-identity, sexual orientation, ethnicity. It matters for their future — who will get education and at what cost? It matters for their health — who

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<sup>5</sup> Koester

gets access to the wonders of modern medicine? It matters to their tummies — which of our siblings will go without supper tonight?

“Those who say, ‘I love God,’ and hate their siblings, are liars; for those who do not love a sibling whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from God is this: those who love God must love their siblings also.”

Loving God is fairly easy, it would seem. Unless we’re in the midst of a psalms-level crisis, God seems pretty lovable. It’s the loving of neighbor (and of self) that we struggle with on a daily basis. But for our God, the one who gives us a love of sacrifice and giving and persistence that knows no limits or boundaries, you can’t have one without the other.

Beloved, you have come here to proclaim your love for God in hymns and prayers and offerings and the joy of a community. You are sent to seek outlets for the love you have been so freely given, to abide in this love in order to abide in your God. See this week if you can’t step up your sharing of love just a little bit. Look for those places where you’ve tried a hundred other verbs, some of them fantastically dull, some of them nice and salty, and see if this central verb of our faith might get you a little bit farther. And, if you find yourself discouraged or fearful or just exhausted by what you encounter in the great-big Out There, hold fast to the words of 1 John, but also of President Austin: “Don’t forget to show love.”

Amen.