

I John 4:7-21 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 Jesus is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.

I John 4:7-21

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"The Star to Every Wand'ring Bark"

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Love. We talk about it all the time. Not a worship service goes by that Love is not mentioned in a sermon, a prayer, a hymn – many times, all three. When I pray, the two most common descriptors out of my mouth are "Holy God" and "Loving God", which probably tells you a lot about how I relate to God. I mention love a lot outside of Sunday morning, too. I say "I love you" to my husband, my daughters, my family, and even many friends. I also use it for a host of other reasons. I love old musicals, and certain hymns and classic rock. I love Downton Abbey and the Sound of Music and the Indiana Jones movies. I love Maggie Smith and Alan Rickman and Jay Leno and Julie Andrews and Jane Austin and William Shakespeare and JK Rowling and Bono and Tom Petty and Aaron Rodgers and the singing hood ornament in the All State commercial. What's more, I use it sarcastically, as in: I love it when the computer doesn't work. As if, by saying so through my teeth, I could lull the computer into a false sense of security. I love it when my checkbook balances. I love that I have heated seats in the car. I love that I can refill prescriptions online. The difficulty becomes that I use the word "love" so often and in such a wide variety of contexts that the word is practically meaningless. When I use the same word to describe my feelings for my husband and for chocolate, the word begins to lose value.

I don't know if that was always true in English. Perhaps so. But it was William Shakespeare some four centuries ago that offers a beautiful understanding in English, from which my sermon this morning takes it's title. He writes in Sonnet 116:

Let me not to the marriage of true minds
Admit impediments. Love is not love
Which alters when it alteration finds,
Or bends with the remover to remove.

O no! it is an ever-fixed mark
That looks on tempests and is never shaken;
It is the star to every wand'ring bark,
Whose worth's unknown, although his height be taken.
Love's not Time's fool, though rosy lips and cheeks
Within his bending sickle's compass come;
Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks,
But bears it out even to the edge of doom.
If this be error and upon me prov'd,
I never writ, nor no man ever lov'd.

The star to every wand'ring bark – and bark, by the way, means boat in this case. Not the sound a dog makes. Just as the stars guide sailors on the sea, so true, real, lasting love is the guide, the measure, and the energy for human life. Now, Shakespeare may well be referring to romantic love – most scholars seem to think so – but the author of the first letter of John seems to agree that love is the guide, measure and energy of human life. Though, of course, he speaks of God's love.

Or more specifically, he tells us that God is love. That's where we've got to start, and it is profound. What that means is that love is not a word we look up in the dictionary. It's not a feeling we get when our hearts are twitterpated. It's not an adjective. It's not a concept to be studied theoretically.

Love is what? A Noun. A person. God is love. God is the embodiment of perfect love. God is the standard by which love is measured—if indeed, it is even possible to measure love.

"When Robert Ingersoll, the notorious skeptic, was in his heyday, two college students went to hear him lecture. As they walked down the street after the lecture, one said to the other, "Well, I guess he knocked the props out from under Christianity, didn't he?" But the other answered, "No, I don't think he did. Ingersoll did not explain my mother's life, and until he can explain my mother's life, I will stand by my mother's God." [from James S. Hewett, *Illustrations Unlimited*, Tyndale, 1972, p. 381; www.Sermons.com.] Obviously, this young man's mother knew God intimately, personally. Her relationship with God flooded every aspect of her living, to the point where it was impossible to explain his mother's life with acknowledging the presence of God within her. In Jesus Christ, love became flesh. And God is known when love is known.

The second thing John tells us is that God initiates love in human life. Twice in the lesson for today, John calls his readers "beloved". Some translates use "dear friends" or "brethren", but those aren't good translations. The word there is *Agapetoi* (Ἀγαπητοί), taken from the Greek word *Agapē* (ἀγάπη) meaning sacrificial or selfless love. The community is known by the love God has for all of us.

This is not a love that you can achieve or accomplish. This love is freely given. It stems from God's very nature, and is God's gift to us. "John Elderidge, in his book, *Waking the Dead*, talks about the wounded heart of his friend Abby. Listen to her words: "The assault started as a young girl. There was something about me that seemed to aggravate my father. Something that seemed to annoy him and repel him. As I grew older, I only seemed to become more frustrating to him. I would ask him a question about how he was doing, and I would watch as the look of annoyance filled his eyes. And I began to suspect that there was something deeply wrong with me, something that made me unlovable, undesirable. Something that was "too much" and yet "not enough"." I've met a lot of Abbys in this world. [from "Furnishing It with Love" by J. Howard Olds, www.Sermons.com.]

God is love, and God gives it freely. You don't earn it. It stems from God's nature, not our worthiness. We recognize it, according to John, in two ways. First and foremost, love is recognized and defined in the sacrificial love of Jesus Christ for humankind.

"This is a story about Sadhu Sundar Singh, who was a convert to Christianity, and who became a missionary to India.

"One late afternoon, Sadhu was traveling on foot through the Himalaya Mountains when he encountered another heading to the same monastery. It was bitter-cold and night was coming on and they journeyed on together for a while. Sadhu's companion warned him that they were in danger of freezing to death if they did not reach the monastery before darkness fell.

"Just as they were traversing a narrow path above a deep precipice, they heard a cry for help. Down the cliff lay a man who had fallen and was seriously injured. Sadhu's companion shook his head remorsefully and said, "there's nothing we can do for him now. We cannot stop, or there will be three dead instead of one."

"But Sadhu, remembering the story of the Good Samaritan, replied, "I cannot pass by on the other side and not help him."

"So his companion set off through the snow that had started to fall, while Sadhu Singh clamored down to where the injured man lay. His leg was broken, and he could not walk, so Sadhu took his blanket, made a sling of it, and tied the man on his back. Then, bending under his burden, he began a body-torturing climb. By the time he reached the narrow path again, he was drenched with sweat.

"Doggedly, he made his way on through the deepening snow. It was dark now, and it was all he could do to follow the path. But he persevered, and though faint with fatigue and overheated with exertion, he finally saw the lights of the monastery. Then, for the first time, he stumbled and nearly fell, but not from weakness. He had stumbled over some object lying in the path. He had been down on one knee and brushed the snow from the object, revealing the body of his fellow traveler, frozen to death, within sight of the monastery.

"Years later, a disciple asked Sundar Singh, "What is life's most difficult tasks?" Sundar replied, "To have no burden to carry." [7 ¶s from "When Being Good Is Bad For You Or Breaking The Chains Of Co-dependency" by Maxie Dunnam, www.Sermons.com.] Sundar Singh understand Jesus' sacrifice. And he understood the call to imitate Jesus. Love is recognized and defined in the sacrificial love of Jesus Christ for humankind.

But, says John, the only way the post-resurrection world is going to encounter and experience God's love for us is if we share it. It's sort of a chicken-and-egg kind of question. Does our knowledge of the God who is love cause us to love one another, or is it our love for one another that allows us to know God? John would say that's a false dichotomy. It's not either/or. It's both/and. I love how Leonard Sweet explains this when he writes, "...these verses deny any mystical union with the deity solely for the purpose of experiencing a vision or "ecstasy" of God. Our "vision" of God, John claims, is found in a mirrored reflection. When God's love for us is successfully reproduced in ourselves we obtain not higher and clearer visions, but deeper submissions and broader incarnations of God's holiness. Knowledge of God means acknowledging God in every aspect of life. Communion with God means union with the community of creation in which God is alive and at work. [from Commentary on I John 4:7-21 by Leonard Sweet, www.Sermons.com.] Love reproduces itself. If we love God, if God's love is manifest in our lives, the world will know it in how we treat others. Sundar Singh understood that. He lived it.

I said earlier that Love is a Noun – a person. God is love. But it's also a verb. An action. A commitment and way of being in the world.

“Some years ago, the atomic submarine *The Thresher* disappeared in the depths of the ocean. In those days, subs could only go so deep. The experts surmised that it had gone too deep and thus lost control. Some years after it disappeared, advancements in technology enabled us to develop subs that could go much lower, and eventually, the Navy went looking for *The Thresher*.

In time, they found it – a hunk of steel that looked like a crushed wad of paper on the ocean floor. The pressure within was obviously not able to withstand the pressure without, and so it had imploded; it had collapsed in upon itself. But this was the surprising thing about the whole situation. Around the crushed *Thresher*, there were sea creatures – all sorts of sea creatures. They had big eyes, their skin was very thin, and yet, they were swimming around the *Thresher* in the same environment, the same pressure that had crushed this steel machine as though it were a toy made of cardboard. How could these sea creatures survive in the setting of that pressure? Scientists, writing about that phenomenon, told us that inside these sea creatures was an opposite and equal pressure to that which was outside them.

That’s a parable to us. That’s the way it must be in your life and mine. The indwelling Christ is to be cultivated to the point that the power of God’s love within us can withstand the pressures of a sometimes dark and hateful world around us. [3 ¶]s adapted from “Compassion Fatigue” by Maxie Dunnam, www.Sermons.com.]

To that end, John tells us that perfect love casts out fear. Now, he’s referring there specifically to judgement. We don’t have to be afraid of hell when Jesus takes up residence inside of us. But we can also begin to overcome the hell around us by letting love be what drives our choices and our interactions. We don’t need to fear those who are different. Love can give us the courage to act, to bear another’s burden, to care even when all seems hopeless.

“Jim Wallis is the founder of the Sojourner's Community in Washington, D.C. He tells the story of a friend of his who happened to be in Sarajevo when that city was under siege in the early 1990s, and one afternoon, this man found himself trapped in his rental car in the middle of a volley of bullets. Gunfire was all around him, people were screaming and fleeing in all directions, and he thought to himself: this is where I die. As he was crouching down in his seat, he happened to see a young girl fall to the street. She’d been caught in the crossfire. A man standing nearby scooped her up, obviously shaken and distraught, and the sight of a severely wounded child enabled Wallis’ friend to forget his fear. He opened his window and called to the man, "Get in. I will take you to the hospital."

Threading through shops and around fleeing people, they made for the hospital. In the backseat, the man cradled his little girl on his lap, rocking her gently, sobbing, and said, "Hurry, mister, she is still alive."

A little while later he said, "Hurry, mister, she is still breathing."

A few moments later he said, "Hurry, she is still warm."

They finally got to the emergency room of the hospital, turned the child over to the doctors. He said, "Hurry please. She is getting cold." But by then, she was gone.

Afterwards, the two men were washing the blood from their hands, and the other man seemed beyond all words. He washed in silence with tears in his eyes. Wallis’ friend was silent too. What do you say to a man who has seen his daughter shot in the street? Suddenly, the other man took a deep breath and wept out, "I don't know how I am going to tell her parents that she is dead."

Wallis' friend was astonished. He said, "I thought she was *your* child?"

To which the man responded, "Aren't they all." [9 ¶]s adapted from “Now What?” by Mark Trotter, www.Sermons.com.]

Now there’s a man who understood that Love is the star to every wand’ring bark. May we know the same. Amen.