

Perfection in Love

Isaiah 41:8-10 NRS But you, Israel, my servant, Jacob, whom I have chosen, the offspring of Abraham, my friend; ⁹ you whom I took from the ends of the earth, and called from its farthest corners, saying to you, "You are my servant, I have chosen you and not cast you off"; ¹⁰ do not fear, for I am with you, do not be afraid, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my victorious right hand.

1 John 4:16-21 NRS 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.

Luke 12:6-7 NRS Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? Yet not one of them is forgotten in God's sight. ⁷ But even the hairs of your head are all counted. Do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows.

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I'd like for you to take out a hymnal and open it to hymn number 263. This hymn is a favorite of mine and may be a favorite of yours as well. It's a majestic hymn. *Immortal, Invisible, God Only Wise*. Look at the words. Look at how majestic they are. But in many ways this hymn describes a God who is somewhere else, who is hidden from us. It even says, "inaccessible, hid from our eyes."

This morning we're going to take a look at the first letter of John, a little, tiny book about 3 1/2 pages long – short, but filled with great wisdom. In today's text from the fourth chapter we read in the 16th verse "God is love." I'm not sure that's the God that we want. Perhaps the God we want is more like the God described in the hymn, detached, elsewhere, a God too "other" for us to be able to relate to. In our world, where we seem to have a lot of moral confusion, we want a God who lays down a clear law, and holds everyone accountable, and catches the cheaters and punishes, and who rewards those who are obedient. In a world where we feel insecure, we want a God who'll control nature, who'll keep us safe, who'll protect us from sickness and every other type of harm. And quite frankly in our greed, we would welcome a God who promises to make us rich, if we will just believe the right things and obey a few simple principles. But do we want a God who is love?

Would we really rather have an angry God, an unapproachable God? Would we really rather have a God that isn't too close? When John wrote this letter, he could've said that God is power, or goodness, or order, but he didn't. He said God is love. Love is a divine reality - it is the core of who and what God is. To talk about the love of God is to talk about what God has done, and is doing. God's love is self-sacrificing love. All we have to do is look at what God has done. Love isn't a concept, or an abstract idea, or a momentary emotion. It's an action. It's a relationship.

We have such a confused idea of love. We use the word love in so many ways. We get it confused with a temporary feeling, with urges and desires.¹ Lust is about our wants, our desires, our needs. Love is about others. Love is outward facing. When we love we forget our self-interest, our self-concern, and our selfishness.

We're told in Genesis that we're made in God's image. In today's scripture, John tells us that God is love. And then John says, "as God is, so are we in this world." What does that mean? Jesus said, "Love the Lord your God and love your neighbor as yourself." (Matt 22:37-40) That's how we are to be in this world. In the Gospel of John, Jesus says, "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 13:34-35) Our text today from First John puts it in even stronger terms. 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. It's hard for us to remember that we're made in God's image. It's even harder for us to remember that other people are also made in God's image.

We come to worship and sing songs of praise to God. Praising God is important! But worship isn't just what we do in these four walls. Our life is to be an act of worship. Praising God and service to the world go hand in hand. One doesn't take the place of the other. It isn't a matter of one or the other, but of praise and service. It's impossible to love God without also loving our neighbor. The two are inseparable. Acts of love to God are pretty easy. We can sing and raise our hands in adoration. We can pray and give thanks. We can bring our offerings.

But this part about loving our neighbors is a lot more difficult sometimes. John tells us, "Whoever fears has not reached perfection in love." Think for a moment. How much of your life is influenced by fear? Consciously or unconsciously, how many of your decisions are influenced by fear or insecurity or worry? Yet, over and over in the Bible we are told to fear not, do not be afraid. In the Old Testament, Isaiah delivers God's message, writing, "do not fear, for I am with you, do not be afraid, for I am your God" (Isaiah 41:10) In the New Testament, when Jesus was preaching to a crowd of strangers, he said, Do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows. (Luke 12:7) Jesus said do not be afraid because you are valuable in God's sight. You are valuable, not because of anything that you have done, but because God loves you. And in today's text from First John, we're told there is no fear in love. John writes, "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." (1 John 4:18)

Why are we afraid? What fears do you have? Are you willing to name some of some of your fears? Here's a small fear. I don't like to dance because I'm afraid of making a fool of myself. What fears do you have that keep you from doing things? How much would your fear be diminished if you reminded yourself that God loves you no matter what? Are you afraid to mention your faith to someone else because you're afraid they'll think that you're some sort of fanatic? Are you afraid to help someone else because you're afraid they might take advantage of you? Are you afraid to show love for fear that you might get hurt? I think all of us have these kinds of fears. And it's because we're afraid to be taken advantage of, afraid of what someone might think, afraid that we will get hurt. We forget that through all of this, God loves us. Jesus set the example. Jesus showed us the path. Jesus reached out to all that he met - to everyone, rich and poor, powerful and weak, healthy and ill, even alive and dead.

We know that children who grow up without a family can be very insecure and very unsure of their own worth, because they don't have the love of parents supporting them and reassuring them. Their whole outlook on life can be incomplete, unsure, and timid. It's the same with us. If we remember that God's love for us is who God is, who God always is, who God always will be, then we can be bold and confident in reaching out to others, knowing that we have an anchor in God. Where love is supreme and saturates us, there is no room for fear.

Do you hesitate to pick up the phone and call somebody who's on the prayer list because you're afraid you won't know what to say? Do you hesitate to visit someone in the hospital, because you have no idea what you can say that will comfort them, and you're afraid that you'll say something wrong? Are you afraid to help serve the meal of grace at the cooperative community ministries because the people are homeless or hungry and you don't think you can relate to them at all? Are you afraid to call an old friend that you haven't talked to in years for fear that they will hang up on you? What are you afraid of? If your heart is filled with love, then there is little reason to fear.

Ask yourself would you rather have a God you fear, or a God who loves you? God is God no matter how you picture God, but how you picture God is important to how you relate to God. This morning in our adult education class, we heard a young man say that the opposite of love isn't hate, it's indifference. I would suggest to you that the opposite of love is fear. Fear drives out love. Love replaces fear. If you're mean to your dog, your dog may be obedient, but out of fear, not out of love. When fear enters a marriage relationship, love is quickly driven out.

Fear is powerful. But if our faith is based on fear, our faith will have no joy. "Fear cannot generate love, sympathy, tenderness, or compassion. We cannot scare people into tolerance, or terrify them into kindness. The fruit of fear ends up being distrust, suspicion, and resentment."² Fear is a sign of distorted or inadequate religion. Only the merciful are sure of mercy, and only the forgiving are sure of forgiveness. Only the loving heart lives in the love of God.³

God is love, and God invites us into a relationship of love, not of fear. Only then, can we truly love God, love our neighbor, and love ourselves. It's a transforming experience that drives fear out of our lives and makes us bold enough to act with love in every aspect of our lives. Amen.

¹ Seen on a restroom wall - "Love is all I want." A reply was scrawled underneath, "Sex is all you get."

² William L. Self, *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Vol.2* (Louisville, Westminster John Knox, 2008) p 471

³ William L. Self, *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Vol.2* (Louisville, Westminster John Knox, 2008) p 471