



Love One Another, 2008 photograph by Nathan Harper, Gatlinburg, TN April 28, 2024

1 John 4:7-21

4:7 Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God.

4:8 Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love.

4:9 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.

4:10 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.

4:11 Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another.

4:12 No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.

4:13 By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit.

4:14 And we have seen and do testify that the Father has sent his Son as the Savior of the world.

4:15 God abides in those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God, and they abide in God.

4:16 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.

4:17 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.

4:18 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.

4:19 We love because he first loved us.

4:20 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.

4:21 The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.

An Inconvenient Commandment

Prayer: O God of love, as we gather here this morning, give us rest from our work, open us up to the work you are doing in our community, in our world, and in our souls. Help us to hear and to receive your good news...

I am calling this an inconvenient commandment because we are called to love... inconveniently. The love that we are called to is not the easy kind, where you love those who also love you; who are attractive to you, who are beloved. It is of the loving your enemies kind. And this is why we need some support, and its practice is deserving of reflection, conversation, encouragement. Because this love can also be dangerous, unexpected, and when you are in the thick of it, people around you will not necessarily understand what you are doing.

In Matthew 5 Jesus says: *I say to you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven, for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.*¹

The first letter of John is misleading in its title in English, it is not a letter at all, it came into our Bibles as an authoritative interpretation of the Gospel of John, specifically on the commandment that Jesus gives his disciples at the last Supper in the Gospel of John:

*Little children, I am with you only a little longer ... I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. 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.*¹

Just that. How do we do that? Without Jesus? These books, the letters of John, date from the mid-second century. They make up a commentary, a devotional meditation on what it means to love in the way that Christ commanded his disciples.

I would like to take a step back to take a step forward this morning, because there are two historical interpreters of this text, voices who I find compelling, that I would like to share with you.

1. The first I would like to turn to is the theologian Lessing, Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, German philosopher, and son of a Lutheran Pastor. He lived in the 1700's and wrote a drama depicting a tradition about the Apostle John in old age. I am going to share part of it for you:

“John, the good John who wished never again to be separated from his Church which he had gathered at Ephesus, this single congregation was a sufficiently large stage for his teaching of wonders and his wonderful teaching. John was an old man, so old that --

The pious and simple folk thought he would never die.

Yet they saw him day by day approaching nearer to death.

Soon his disciples could not even carry him to church. And yet John would not neglect any assembly; he would allow no assembly to disperse without his address to the community, which would rather have been deprived of its daily bread than of his words.

...everyday John's address became simpler and shorter, until finally he reduced it to the words... 'little children, love one another.'

...But one so quickly becomes tired of the good and even of the best, if it begins to be an everyday thing. At the first assembly at which John could say no more than 'Little children, love one another,' these words had a wonderful effect. So, it was also in the second, third, and fourth assemblies; for the people said, the weak old man cannot say anything more. But when the old man now and then had good and cheerful days again, and still said nothing more, and still had nothing further for the daily assembly than 'Little children love one another'; when they saw that it was not that the

¹ John 13:33-35

old man was only able to say these few words but that he deliberately chose not to say more: then 'Little children, love one another' became insipid, flat, and meaningless. Brethren and disciples could hardly listen any more without feeling sick of it, and finally had the audacity to ask the good old man: 'But, Master, why do you always say the same thing?'

*John replied: 'Because it is the Lord's command; because this alone, this alone, if it is done, is enough, is sufficient and adequate.'"*²

I love that Lessing is noticing that we get easily used to the absolute best, and no longer value it. "One so quickly becomes tired of the good and even the best, if it begins to be an everyday thing." *Little children, love one another.* This message alone is enough. But it is so simple. Simplistic. It almost needs to be made more complicated. But it is not. That would be heresy. It is easy enough for a child to do, it is so hard a philosopher king cannot accomplish it fully. We are on the edge of one of God's mysteries. God is close. God is love. You are loved.

2. I will take another step back into history this time to the year 415 in our Common Era. Augustine of Hippo is preaching to his congregation. (He is not a Saint yet.) He preached that year in the season following Easter through the book of 1 John from beginning to end.

There are 24 sermons on 1 John. Sermons 9-21 are on our text today. Augustine's sermons are shorter than mine, although he preached every day and I only get a shot once a week.

In sermon 16 "Caring for Love." He begins:

Love is a delightful word, but the thing itself is even more delightful. I cannot be speaking of it all the time. I have much to do, and my various activities distract me so that I am not always at leisure to speak of love, even though there is nothing better I could do. But even if I cannot always be speaking of it, I can always keep it in myself. It is like the "Alleluia" we sing during Eastertide. Singing "Alleluia" lasts only a few moments, and we go on to something else. "Alleluia" means "praise God," you know you cannot always be praising God in words, but you can always praise God by your way of life...

This is what I say, then, my friends, and I would not stop saying it even if I could. Let your actions be appropriate to the season, hour, or day. Should you always be speaking, silent, resting, or fasting? Always giving bread to the needy? Always clothing the naked? Always visiting the sick? Always reconciling those having a quarrel? Always burying the dead? No, now you should do one thing, now another. These actions have a beginning and an end. But the principle that commands them does not begin and it must not stop. The love within you should not cease. Love's services must be done at the appropriate time."

There are seasons for action, but the motivation is from the one God. And God is love.

In the last seven days we have baptized a baby, welcomed a new member, held a tag sale, prepared for a Quarterly meeting, seen Kaleigh off to General Conference with the Methodist churches, spent time in reflection with Jeff Birch as he prepares for graduation and ordination. We buried the husband of a member, prayed with her, reflected on the maintenance of our cemeteries, and maintained them. Attended to the work of the church, gathered money and resources for those experiencing food insecurity and homelessness.

² *Lessing's Theological Writings*: A Library of Modern Religious Thought Stanford University Press 1956 p. 58-59

³ *Love One Another, My Friends: St Augustine's Homilies on the First Letter of John* t. John Leinenweber Harper and Row, 1989

I am new here, there are a lot of other things happening outside of my awareness. That is my view.

This is the work of love. But as Augustine said about himself, we are busy, and we do not have time to think about this too much – it is time to go out and do these things. When we have the opportunity.

So thinking in the present now and in the immediate future, what does love look like in an election cycle? In this community? As the marinas open, as people come back for the summer, as the school year wraps up? Who is suffering because of conflict? Who needs to see someone living according to the principle of love? Cornel West, who was a professor of mine when I was at Yale Divinity school is fond of saying: Justice is what love looks like in public.

Little children: love one another.

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¹ Matthew 5:44-45