

Wading River Congregational Church

SERMONS IN PRINT

PETER J. VIBERT, PASTOR

NOVEMBER 5, 2006



1 John 4:7-21

"God Is Love"

We have arrived at the best known and best loved passage in John's letter; one that some people call one of the theological high points in the NT. The reason, of course, is the repeated statement "God is love." We will have to ask what that means.

But we have first to set it in the context of John's whole sermon-like letter. He is writing to late 1st C. Christians in the Greco-Roman culture of the province of Asia - what we today call Turkey - to reassure them that they do indeed have true Christian faith. They are surrounded by pagan religions and practices, by Jews who think the Christians are off the path, by incipient Gnostics who claim to possess "secret knowledge" that leads to true spirituality, and by splinter groups who have already gone out of some Christian churches in pursuit of different viewpoints.

If you have been with us any part of the past 8 weeks, you know that John reassures the Christians by offering them three "tests" that he is sure they can pass: one, do they *believe* that Jesus was God's Son who came to earth in the flesh to die for their sins and is now at the Father's right hand as their advocate; two, have they embraced the fact that he came as their Savior, and *repented* of their sins and started to lead a moral life; and

three, have they learned from his love that they are now called and commanded to *love* one another in practical, sacrificial ways. Belief, repentance and love are themes that John repeats over and over: like a thorough teacher, he tells them what he is going to tell them, then he tells them it, then he tells them what he has just told them.

1) *God Is Love*

You will have noticed that this passage deals primarily with themes 1 and 3 - the coming of Jesus, and Christians' love for one another. In the middle of this, he makes the remarkable statement that "God is love." What does he mean?

At its most basic level, it means that God is *loving in all he does*. In all his ways - in his creating all things, in his giving life, in his sustaining his world, in his sending rain and crops and wealth and happiness and family and tribe and nation, God is loving. When he sends commandments on right living, he is loving. When he sends leaders, he is loving. When he rescues slaves or exiles and gives them a land and cities, he is loving.

But that's easy to grasp! We have to go on from there to more difficult things. When he sends prophets to warn a crumbling society,

he is loving. When he purges evil from their midst, he is loving. When he judges, he is loving. When he disciplines or punishes, he is loving.

When he takes people out of this world and into his presence far too young, he is loving. When he calls people to join in the great battle of good and evil, and to know its cost and its pain, and to become brave and sad, he is loving. When he does many other things invisible or incomprehensible to his people, he is still loving – just as a Father is to his children, giving them the freedom to make their own mistakes, to find their own paths, to assert their independence, without ever ceasing to love them, even when they cause him grief by some of their choices.

But John says God has demonstrated his love in clear ways that his readers can comprehend. One: he loved his fallen and rebellious world, even when the people he made and sustained did not love him. “This is love; not that we loved God, but that he loved us...” He took the initiative because *love is a part of his character*, and not because we deserved it; and he showed us his love by sending his only Son to live among us. And Jesus was more than an example of what love looks like in human form: *in love he came to share with us the very life of God* which was in him, if we would only place our trust in him and be joined to him by faith. “God sent his Son into the world that we might live through him.”

But for that new life to be possible in us, the Son who was also the Savior first had to deal with the damage that sin had done to our relationship with the Father, and *he showed his love by laying down his life as an atoning sacrifice for us*. For those who embraced that death, and turned to Jesus in repentance and trust, the penalty due to sin was removed and the power of sin was broken in their lives. This was the greatest possible

demonstration of God’s love for his fallen and wayward people. God *is* love – in all that he does for his people, even for those who are not inclined to love him.

So where God is, there is love. Those who claim to know God will be marked by his love for them; they will be known as, and will live as, loved people. Now it is possible to make the mistake of turning this correspondence around, saying “wherever there is love, there is God.” You can misread John at this point, when he writes “everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God.” But you can only make love the sole and supreme mark of true godliness by wrenching that one sentence out of the whole context of John’s letter; and by also misunderstanding what Godly love is.

God’s love is sacrificial action that meets the needs of other people. Humanly, love can mean many things, including an emotion of affection, or physical desire. In our fallen state, to be “in love” is no guarantee of “knowing God” or of being “in God.” That is not to deny that human love, like all human goods, can be traced back to the God who made us in his image. But we cannot simply equate true spirituality with “being loving.”

2) We Ought To Love

What are the consequences of God’s love? That we can *be redeemed* through Jesus. That we can *share in the life* he came to bring. But also that we are changed into people who can love – and who know *they should love*. “Since God so loved us, we ought to love one another.” Philosophers since David Hume in the 18th C. have said you can’t get an “ought” from an “is” – that the way things *are* doesn’t tell you how they *ought* to be – but John knows that doesn’t apply to God! Since God loved us, we *ought* to love one another. And we know at some deep level that this is true. Even the scarred image of God in us tells us

that we were created to love – to love God as he has loved us, and to love others as we love ourselves.

Because we know we are made to love and be loved, we crave love - even though at times we pretend otherwise. When we are deprived of it, we wither inside, and we act out our insecurity and fear and rage. But love can change all that: the love of a special someone who thinks that we - of all people! - are special; the love that is in Jesus which says we are loved by the Father. We need to love and to be loved. But if that is not enough, we have the direct command of Jesus: "love one another as I have loved you."

John has two more consequences of God's love to present to us. "No-one has ever seen God, but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us." It is an extraordinary (if difficult) statement. Earlier in his Gospel, John had said "no-one has ever seen God..." and gone on to say "but the only-begotten has made him known" (Jn 1:18). Now he says in his letter, "no-one has ever seen God... but if we love one another, God's love is perfected in us" - that is, just as people know God from seeing Jesus, they *know God from seeing his love at work as believers love one another*. One consequence of God's love for us is that when we in turn love one another, we show the God who "is love" to the world.

There is one more consequence of God's loving us: we are made secure. "Perfect love casts out fear... and we will have confidence in the day of judgment." When we know that God loves us, and has shown it by sending Jesus as our Savior, we know we have nothing to fear from God. "There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus," says Paul (Rom 8:1). We do not need to be afraid of God. *God is love, and if we know him, we know we are secure now and forever.*

"Nothing," as Paul says, "in this life or the next... neither life nor death nor angels nor powers... can separate us from the love of God that is in Jesus Christ" (Rom 8:38-39).

3) *Love Or Fear?*

Where does all this leave you and me, Christians of the 21st and not the 1st C.? Are *we* reassured about our faith by passing John's tests of belief, and repentance, and love for one another?

Or are we in fact *fearful*, because we know that too often we are weak in our belief, slack in our repentance, and self-centered and self-pitying rather than sacrificially loving other people? Do we feel loved, or a little scared? There is a friend of mine who often uses the image that one day there will be knock at the door, and some brusque and official-looking men will say "OK, the game is up. We know all about you. You have to come with us..." Even if you are a Christian who knows in his or her head that God shows grace to people who don't deserve it, you can still sometimes wonder in your gut if you will make it through, or whether grace will be withdrawn and you will suddenly be exposed for who you really are.

Fear takes many forms - we are anxious about ourselves, our health, our incomes; we are fearful of aging, fearful of dying. We are concerned about our parents, or our children, or both. What will become of those young people we invested our lives in; who we still feel responsible for even if they are now grown up enough to be making their own decisions about life? It's hard to give them up to God, and trust him to work in them as he worked in us. What if he doesn't? What if they resist? Christian, says John: the perfect love of God drives out fear! We must put the people we love in God's hands, and relinquish them to him, *knowing* that he loves them as much as he loves you and me!

Some of us fear aging, losing vitality, enjoyment, health, friends. Will there be anyone to care for us? Will there be money to pay our medical bills? Will we eke out our last days in a hospital, kept alive by overzealous doctors and guilt-ridden relatives? There *is* plenty to fear in this world. Christian: love casts out fear! Make your wishes for your care known to your family, to your doctor, to God, and then live in peace knowing that your Father in heaven loves you more than you can imagine.

So here's the question for you and for me: Do we know the love of God in Jesus? Has he healed our relationship with the Father? Are we resting in the love the Father has for us? Are we loving others as he loved us? Do we feel loved, or do we feel afraid? God *is* love, and we need to know that, and to know him.

Let us pray...