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1 John 4:7-21
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Love is a Many Splendored Thing!

The story is told of a congregation who had just called a new minister. Everyone was excited about meeting their new pastor and hearing him preach.

Come Sunday morning, the sanctuary was packed. The people sat on the edge of their pews in anticipation of his first sermon.

Sure enough, it was a homerun. He selected as his text, **1 John 4:11**, "Beloved, if God loved us in this way, we also ought to love one another."

As the sermon ended, heads nodded, and the Pastor Nominating Committee breathed a huge sigh of relief. He was a keeper.

But the next Sunday, as the new minister read the text for the day, a few of the old saints raised their eyebrows, for it was the same text as the Sunday before – **1 John 4:11**, "Beloved, if God loved us in this way, we also ought to love one another."

They'd never heard two consecutive sermons on the same text before, but, to give the new preacher the benefit of the doubt, they listened carefully and tried to be open-minded.

However, as the preacher began his sermon, lo and behold, it was the exact same sermon they'd heard the week before, word for word.

They didn't know what to make of it. "Was this some sort of joke?" they wondered. "Were they supposed to get some deeper meaning the second time around?" "Was he even aware that he was repeating himself?"

Out of courtesy, they didn't say anything. They just listened politely and, when the service was over, shook hands at the door and said something like, "That was a mighty interesting sermon you had for us today, Reverend."

The next Sunday, everyone was on pins and needles. The tension was thick as the service began. One could sense that a storm was brewing.

When the new minister began reading the text, the congregation began squirming in their seats, for, once again, he read from **1 John 4:11**, "Beloved, if God loved us in this way, we also ought to love one another."

And, to their dismay, he began the sermon with the same exact words as the two Sundays before.

But before he could get past the introduction, one of the elders jumped up and said, "Preacher, we've heard this sermon twice now. What gives?"

The minister looked at the elder and said, "Why, nothing, really. But rest assured, when you actually start putting this sermon into action, then you'll be ready for a different sermon!"

"Beloved, if God loved us in this way, we also ought to love one another." This is the heart and soul of the gospel of Jesus Christ. It's what distinguishes us as Christians.

In the words of one of my favorite hymns, “They’ll know we are Christians by our love, by our love, yes, they’ll know we are Christians by our love.”

God loves us, and we, in turn, love one another – that’s the essence of the Christian faith. Yet, when you try to put love into action, it’s a lot easier said than done.

Face it, sometimes we don’t feel very loving. And, to be honest, some folks are a lot easier to love than others.

Our epistle lesson today is one of the most eloquent and beautiful statements of what it means to be part of the Christian community.

Located at the end of the First Letter of John, today’s text is a carefully framed testament to the centrality of love as the defining characteristic of a faithful Christian witness.

The epistles which form the final books of our Bible are all letters written by leaders in the early Church and sent to small Christian communities that were struggling to understand how to live together in way that was faithful to the gospel.

Often the epistles address doctrinal errors on the part of the young congregations, other times they reflect the particular concerns of the writer.

At times, the identities of those writers remain a mystery. It was not unusual in the first century for the student of a famous teacher to write under the name of that teacher.

Likewise, writings produced by a school founded by a renowned religious leader, might sometimes be published under the founder's name.

Consequently, most scholars think that it is unlikely that John the Apostle wrote **1 John**.

Nevertheless, the author of **1 John** shares many of the same concerns of John, the author of the **Gospel of John**.

And it is very likely that he is writing to the same community that grew up around the teachings of the Apostle John.

We assume the writer of **1 John** must have been a leader in that community, and he is worried.

He is writing to one of the community's congregations, hoping to fight against some of the heretical teachings which – less than sixty years after the ascension of Jesus – were already creating division in the early Church.

In particular, he wants to stress the humanity and reality of Jesus, and the defining characteristic of Christian life. And that defining characteristic is love.

In his epistle he tells us that if we want to know what God is like, all we have to do is look at Jesus.

Lest we miss his point, he cuts right to the chase and spells it out in three simple words: God is love.

Of all the ways we can describe the nature of God, this is the most fundamental. God is love. It's not just a theory; it's a fact. How do we know?

Because God became a human being (Jesus) and lived as one of us. He embodied compassion by his actions and his teachings. He healed the sick and touched the untouchables.

He embraced those who others turned away. He spoke on behalf of those who had no voice. He taught us to serve one another in humility and even love our enemies.

He stood up to those who put following the rules above mercy and compassion. His entire life was given in love. And it didn't end there.

In death, he gave himself in love, as well. He went to a cross because he could only be who he was. He stretched out his arms in love for the world, and they nailed his hands to a wooden cross.

Let there be no doubt about who God is. Look at Jesus and you know. God is love.

In modern English, love is one word that has many meanings. But, if we look at the original New Testament Greek, we can see what type of love the author of **1 John** is talking about.

In Biblical Greek, words for love include Philia, Eros and Agape.

Phileo is friendship and it means brotherliness or companionship. (Think Philadelphia, the City of Brotherly Love). This is the love that we would have between best friends.

Eros (not actually found in the New Testament) means sexual desire, this is where we get the word erotic from.

Agape is godly love, unconditional and totally unselfish.

In other words, we might say, *Eros* is all take, *Phileo* is give and take, *Agape* is all give.

All through our text, the word for love that is used is *Agape*. It's not sentimental love, it's not sexual, and it's not social love.

It is a supernatural love that the Holy Spirit can put in our hearts, and only the Spirit of God can make it real to us. In other words, it's the love of God.

The clear example of Jesus' teachings is that love is found in what we do.

In Luke, Jesus explains that to be faithful to God we must love everyone the same way we love ourselves (*Luke 10:25-37*). That's harder than it sounds.

Do you ever notice how much slack we cut ourselves?

I notice it when I'm driving. If I forget to use my blinker, it's because I'm absent-minded.

But, if the person in front of me cuts in and forgets to use their blinker, it's because they're a gall-darned idiot (not the words I usually use when I'm driving!)

We are merciful to those whom we love, especially if they're ourselves. We also give sacrificially to them.

When Jesus offered an example of loving our neighbors as ourselves, he described someone who took the time to heal, help, and even financially support an injured stranger.

(Think of the story of the Good Samaritan.)

Not just any stranger, mind you, but a stranger who was racially, politically, and theologically different. Someone you'd never be caught socializing with.

And my bet is, that if it was good enough for Jesus, then it should be good enough for us.

Maybe the best definition of God like loving, is acting towards any person in the way that we would act towards someone we cherished.

The author of our passage for today tells us that when we do that, we are children of God. Significantly, we are also told that someone who loves other people "knows" God.

That's an interesting choice of words, since it directly challenges one of the major heresies of that era.

Starting around the time the author of **1 John** was writing, and for a century to follow, many believers questioned the humanity of Jesus.

They wanted a “pure” God, one who would never be sullied by a weak and fleshly body.

These so called heretics were called “Gnostics,” from the Greek word for “know.” They were “knowers,” people whose intellectual prejudices kept them from appreciating the fullness of the gospel.

Our text today says that the real “knowers” are doers. We do not know God by debating theology. We do not know God with our heads.

We know God through the work of our hands, and only when those hands are extended to our brothers and sisters in love.

We are given a very simple formula in this passage. Those who love others, know God. Those who don’t love other, don’t know God.

God’s love is anything but abstract. It’s concrete and specific, and this is the way we’re called to love one another, not with gushy feelings, but with deeds of loving kindness.

As the writer of the Letter of James puts it:

“And if a brother or sister is naked and in lack of daily food, and one of you tells them, “Go in peace, be warmed and filled;” and yet you didn’t give them the things the body needs, what good is it?” (*James 2:15-16*)

Do you want to evaluate someone’s theology? Don’t look at what seminary they went to or what books they read. Look to see if they love their neighbors.

Want to know if an idea is a Christian one or not? There's a simple test – does it make someone more or less likely to love others, even those they would like to hate?

It's fun to feel like we are better than other people. It's nice not to feel obligated to them.

It's easy to tell them to take the blame for their own troubles, even as we think up all sorts of excuses for our own.

Our text for today won't let us get away with that. After offering us this simple formula, the writer of **1 John** goes on to give us a clear example of what love is.

Let me repeat what I said earlier. It is God, expecting nothing in return, coming to us as a human being and dying that we might live. If anyone has an excuse to be self-righteous, it's God. If anyone deserves what they get, it's all of us.

Yet God, knowing that we were incapable of reaching up – even a little bit – toward heaven, reached out to us.

By comparison, all of our excuses seem pretty lame. We are tempted to say:

“Here's the deal God, I can love my neighbors and all, but that ...
YOU FILL IN THE BLANK – He/She's just mean. You can't really expect me to be charitable toward him/her!”

Somehow, we think that being a little better than someone will get us off the hook, but **1 John** reminds us that God was infinitely better than us; and was willing to suffer and die anyway.

If Jesus doesn't get let off the hook, neither do we.

That's for the best, because something miraculous happens when we genuinely act in love.

The author writes, "No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us..."

Do you want to see God? Go to an inner-city clinic and look into the face of a physician who left her million-dollar practice to work there.

Do you want to see God? Go to a school cafeteria, and watch the one little boy who goes and sits down next to the new kid so he won't feel lonely.

Do you want to see God? Forgive someone who hurt you, and then look in the mirror.

As God's beloved children, he expects us to love one another — not because he will stop loving us if we don't do what he tells us to do, but precisely because he will never stop loving us, no matter what we do.

That's why **1 John** can make the bold assertion:

"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 he first loved us" (*1 John 4:18-19*).

What if it were possible for God to make us and mold us, forgive us and restore us, love us and redeem us until we think like Christ thought, live like Christ lived, and believe as Christ believed?

Would that not be a better life for us all?

Our God says to us, "I love you."

Through Jesus Christ we know those are more than just words alone.

"I love you," he says. And we respond to his love. Not just with the words alone, but with lives that say, "I love you, too."

God is the source of all love, and the miracle is, the more you give away, the more God gives you in return.

Well, here's what I hope you'll take home with you today: **1 John 4:11**, "Beloved, if God loved us in this way, we also ought to love one another."

Amen!