

**Sermon preached by Pastor Robert Barnett at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church
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THE LOVE THAT COMES FROM GOD

1 John 4:7-21

On Valentine's Day, we are reminded about love. Important cues to express your love seem to be all over the place – on TV, in the stores, on candy and other treats. And most of us enjoy the day. For those of us who are married, we want to show love to our wives, for you married ladies, your husbands. If you are dating, your “significant other.” We love our children, our grandchildren. If we have close friends in and outside the church, we can honestly say we love them.

Most of the people we love are those with whom we feel comfortable, who share our values, or to whom we are attracted (it's easy for me to love my wife). We tend to shy away from those who have harmed us by their words or actions.

A few weeks ago (before the “ice age”), Pastor Neil reminded us that love for one another is not an optional add-on to our lives. It is the central core value of our Christian life. He gave some good examples of how we can put love into action.

We are to love people, not just the ones who are easy for us to love, but everyone. Jesus even tells us to love our enemies, to do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. That's a tall order!

Valentine's Day is named after St. Valentine. Who is St. Valentine? We don't really know much about him except for stories, probably based on a few facts and embellished with legend.

One such story claims that Valentine was a priest who served during third century Rome at the time of Emperor Claudius. The emperor wanted to build his army and decided that single men made better soldiers than those that were married. So he outlawed marriage for young men. Valentine decided this decree just wasn't fair or biblical and chose to marry young couples secretly. When Emperor Claudius found out about Valentine's actions he had him put to death.

Another story, perhaps the more familiar and inspiring describes Valentine's life in prison. The jailer, seeing that his prisoner was a learned man, brought his daughter Julia for lessons. Valentine read her stories, taught her arithmetic and told her about Christ (she may have been converted). Just before his execution, Valentine wrote a last note to Julia to thank her for her friendship and urged her to stay close to God. The note was signed, “From your Valentine.” Perhaps this was the start of the custom of exchanging love messages on Valentine's Day.

Whatever story is true; our understanding of St Valentine is that he loved God and people. Love was the central core value of his life.

Do you love people, even your enemies, or those hard to love, or with whom you do not click? Do you find that difficult? Maybe you act politely; maybe you go out of your way to help them. But in your

heart of hearts do you really love them? Or are you like most people and harbor some bitterness and resentment so that your outer actions do not reflect what is going on inside.

When John wrote these words in 1 John 4, he meant “agape” love. That’s the word in Greek and it is different from other kinds of love – it’s not the same as brotherly affection or passionate love. Agape love is unconditional; it is based on choice, not feeling. It is a matter of will and action. Agape love means to love your enemies, love those who hurt you, those who are very difficult, even impossible for you to love. Agape love means that both in our actions and in our hearts we have real love, real affection for other people. Not a feeling, but something we chose to do. But how do we love in this way? Our text this morning will help us get a handle on this question. Let’s dig in.

WHERE DOES REAL LOVE COME FROM?

First, let’s ask, “Where does real love come from?” Read verses 7 and 8. The answer is right there! “Love comes from God” and “God is love.” The first, “love is from God,” indicates that God is the source of love, it comes from Him, agape love is one of His essential attributes. The second, “God is love,” tells us that love is not just one of the Lord’s attributes or actions. In the deepest sense, God’s very nature is love.

Love does not define God, God defines love. All that God does comes from all that He is, including His love. All that God does, even His judgments, are embraced in His agape love. Since God is holy, love that is born out of the very essence of God must be spiritual and holy. It is divine love.

To really understand God and His love, we should begin with the fact that God is a Trinity: one God in three persons – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The Trinity is not something we can fully understand, but it is the truth. I think that Pastor Neil would agree that even with our years of seminary, it is still difficult to get our minds around the Trinity; we simply believe what the Bible says. One person said, “If you try to understand the Trinity completely, you will lose your mind, but if you deny the Trinity you will lose your soul.”

All three persons of the Godhead are at work in love. We see that clearly in our text: verses 7-8 describe the Father’s love; verses 9-11 refer to the Son as a demonstration of the length God will take to show His love; and in verses 12 -13, we see that God’s love actually is in us through the Holy Spirit. When John says “God is love,” he means the Father is love, the Son is love, and the Holy Spirit is love.

If we know God’s nature, if we know the nature of the Trinity, we will love. You see, the one who does not love does not know God. To know God is more than understanding facts, it is a matter of perceiving and living truth with our minds and hearts. Non-Christians may love their families and friends and show much affection, but that is not divine love, agape love.

Divine love causes us to deeply share His life, and enjoy His love, and share – often sacrificially – the love He gives us to others. A rebirth is needed because loving and knowing the Lord means a relationship, a personal experience with the loving God.

But when we know God and realize that He is the source of love, real love may seem out of reach, impossible. It is easy to see God as worthy of our love, but often we see most people as unworthy of love, at least the agape, unconditional love. Most of the time, we love for what we can get out of the

relationship. We love those who love us back, who are grateful for our acts of kindness. It is difficult for you and me to love the so-called unlovable. What enables us to love with the love that comes from God's love? We can draw our passage three ways: our motivation to love, our power to love, and its proof.

OUR MOTIVATION FOR REAL LOVE

First, let's look at the motivation for real love. Look back at verses 9-11. How has God demonstrated real agape love? By sending Christ! He did so publicly, where the Son would step down from the glories of heaven and experience pain and humiliation.

He sent His one and only Son. The Son was the best there was to give, nothing could exceed this gift. Since the relationship between the Father and the Son was perfect love, sending Jesus to earth was an incredible sacrifice. Paul called this love an "indescribable gift" (2 Co 9:15). Never before has God done such a thing in history! Christ unveils God's heart, it is a demonstration of how wide and long and high and deep is His love (Eph 3:18).

How has God demonstrated agape love? Through what Christ did for us! God loved us before we loved Him. We were spiritually dead in our transgression and sins as verse 10 implies. We were hostile toward God, His enemies according to Romans 5:10. But He loved us.

God's love sent Jesus to be an atoning sacrifice for our sins. What does that mean? An atoning sacrifice is an act of "removing" an offense to repair a relationship, often through a payment or sacrifice. The Father gave His Son's life to cover sins and remove guilt. Through that atoning sacrifice, God was able to forgive sinners and yet remain consistent with His holy nature. In Evangelism Explosion we learn that God is merciful, so He doesn't want to punish us. But He is just and must punish sin. Jesus is the solution, the acceptable sacrifice. As recipients of God's great love, we are to love fellow believers and all other people out of profound gratitude for His indescribable gift. God's real love is demonstrated by His sending His son as an atoning sacrifice for us. We love because we are grateful for what God has done.

Want to really love one another? It's possible only when we love because of Christ's sacrifice for us and are enabled to love by the Holy Spirit.

OUR POWER FOR REAL LOVE

We may be really grateful for what God has done for us in Christ. We may be highly motivated. But when the rubber hits the road – when we are tired, when conflict gets intense and unavoidable – loving with the divine, agape kind of love seems impossible. Where do we get the power for this real love? Let's look at what our text can tell us.

"No one has seen God." That's how John begins verse 12. God cannot be seen. Even when God appeared in the Old Testament, people caught only suggestions of what He is like. When Jesus walked the earth, people saw the Son and through Him the character of the Father and the Spirit, but they didn't see the whole Trinity. And now, in our time we don't even see the Son in human form. There is a funny story that may illustrate this problem:

A kindergarten teacher was once watching her students draw pictures and she came across one little girl who was coloring away very vigorously. She asked the little girl what she was drawing. The girl said, "Oh, I'm drawing God." The teacher paused for a moment and then said gently, "But no one knows what God looks like." The little girl said, "I know. But in a minute, when I get finished, they will know."

God cannot be seen. But if we love one another, God lives within us as His love is made complete in us. We can't see God, but He lives in us. The implication John makes here is mind-blowing, incredible. God cannot be seen in Himself, but can be seen in those whom He abides. Love that comes from God, displayed in the lives of those reborn in Him makes God a tangible reality

F. F. Bruce wrote "The love of God displayed in His people is the strongest apologetic that God has in the world. When His love is planted in their hearts, and He Himself dwells within them His love is perfected."

How does God live in us? Through the Holy Spirit! We know that we live (or abide) in Christ, because He has given us His Spirit. To abide in Christ means to be in spiritual oneness with Him, not merely a spectator, but participants in the drama of God's love. As we abide in Christ and spend time in fellowship with Him, we grow in love for God and love for each other.

The idea of abiding in Christ is something John talks about a lot. Listen to these passages from the Gospel of John, chapter 15.

I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing.

Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself unless it abides in the vine, so neither can you unless you abide in Me.

If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love

If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.

Do you get the point? Only when we grab hold of Christ – like a branch holding to the vine for its life – do we see the fruit of God's character grow in us. Only when we spend time with Jesus, know and obey His Word, find out what's on His heart and make that passion our own, can we love with God's love.

That means that real love, agape love, is empowered by God and not us. God's life lives in us, through the Holy Spirit. We cannot really love by doing acts of kindness (in our own strength), but only when we abide in Christ

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THE PROOF OF GOD'S POWER IN US

God does enable His people to love. But, how do we know that we have that power for real love? The reality of God's indwelling love becomes apparent in our testimony. Our confession demonstrates that

God's divine love in us is real. God's love – agape love – is not simply an emotional experience of being loved or simply a response to an ethical command. Agape love does not primarily exist in loving conduct or acts of kindness, though these are outward displays of the reality of internal love.

Verse 16 says, “Whoever lives in love lives in God and God lives in him.” What does this mean? As Jim Boice points out, God is always the first in spiritual things. Apart from the activity of the Holy Spirit to show us our sin and turn us to the Savior, we would not believe in Christ or love one another. To believe in Christ and to love each other are not conditions by which we may dwell in God and He in us. Rather they are evidences that God dwells in us and is at work in us.

How do we know if God is at work spiritually in us? One way is by our confession. We confess that we are lost and without hope in a fallen world and we need a Savior. We confess that Christ, who is God, was crucified, dead and buried, and rose from the dead. We confess that God's motivation for giving us salvation does not come from anything we do. It comes from the Trinity's elaborate, unconditional, indescribable love.

That means that sound doctrine must under-gird our living out the love of God. Saying that Jesus is the Son of God and the Savior of the world is not merely a verbal confession. It is a deeply honest recognition of Jesus' humanity, divinity, and mission. It is a readiness to obey God's commands, because He is Lord. It is “saving faith,” to know with our minds and give intellectual assent to the gospel and to know with our hearts, relying on (or trusting in) Jesus with our lives.

Saving faith is an extremely personal experience. Let me ask you. Do you understand the Gospel? What do you rely on? In what do you put your trust? If these are questions you have difficulty answering, please take time today to see Pastor Neil, others in our congregation who are able to help, or me.

Loving one another with agape love is not just an act of sterile obedience; it is also the lively evidence of the Spirit's activity. The perfection of our love demonstrates that God's divine love really operates in and through us.

That sounds good, doesn't it? But if God is perfect and His love is perfect, how can we who are redeemed, but still sinners, expect our love to be perfected? In this passage, the word “perfect” has the sense of being whole or mature. I think the NIV translates the word well. We are completed by the love of God within the believer when God accomplishes what He fully intends to accomplish. God's love is completed not through our perception of it, or our experience of it, but through our expression of it. God's love reaches completion by the degree to which it is shared among us. Our testimony is proof of the Spirit's power in us.

John mentions a few results of this on-going process of completion. First, we have confident assurance as we consider Christ's return and the execution of His righteous judgment. We will have boldness on the Day of Judgment, not fear of punishment. Because of the perfection of His love in us, we increasingly know that despite our continued life in the world, despite our struggles to love and obey God, we have been made different: “In this world we are like Him” (v. 17b). We are like Jesus!

Perfect love casts out fear; that is, “fright” or “terror.” We are no longer terrified in God's courtroom. We know that Christ's atoning sacrifice paid the penalty we deserve and freed us from guilt. When we

are in close communion with God, when we abide in Him, our worries about losing His favor fade away. The reality of who we are in Christ sinks deeply into our souls. We become increasingly free from fear. Through the love of God dwelling in us, unreasonable fears are quieted; we come to rest in the fact that the one who is for us will do nothing to destroy the eternal relationship which Christ has established

Often we fail to love because of fear. We lie, exaggerate, or put a favorable spin on things because we are afraid of the consequences of truth. We lash out or become bitter inside because we are afraid of being diminished in some way. We lack the confidence that comes from knowing who we are in Christ. “Perfect love drives out fear”. There can be no apprehensiveness or fear of God when we fully comprehend His love, as Romans 8:15 reminds us:

For you have not received a spirit of slavery leading to fear again, but you have received a spirit of adoption as sons by which we cry out, “Abba! Father!”

If love for others is absent, love for God also must be absent. If we fail to love people on the horizontal level, we delude ourselves that we love God on the vertical level. Remember that real agape love is neither easy nor possible. Agape love is love of which only God and those indwelt by Him are capable. We will experience the Spirit working in us when we are supernaturally loved by God and supernaturally act in love to others (especially those we couldn’t love on our own).

When our love is not in sync with what we say, John has some pretty tough words. The absence of love for one another is an absence of love for God. It betrays a dubious nature of one’s salvation. Those who live with this duplicity, saying that they love God but in their hearts hate some human being are – in John’s unyielding words – liars! They do not abide in Christ and He does not abide in them. 1 John 2:4 says, “The one who says, ‘I have come to know Him,’ and does not keep His commandments (including loving one another), is a liar, and the truth is not in him.”

Want to really love one another, with agape love? It can happen only when we love because of Christ’s sacrifice for us and are enabled to love by the Holy Spirit.

CONCLUSION

John ends this passage with an exhortation: And this commandment we have from Him, that the one who loves God should love his brother also. It is a summary of Jesus’ words to the rich young ruler. Jesus remarked:

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.” This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets. (Matt. 22:36-38)

Jesus made love the first and second of the commandments: love God and love people. If you think carefully and honestly about what this really means – loving God 100% of the time with 100% of your effort and loving people you find hard to love – this will seem impossible. It is!

Real love – the agape love with which we are to love each other – comes from God. It is ours only when we are reborn by faith as children of God. We admit to God our sin and need for a Savior. We

abandon any effort to get favor with God by something we do. We rely on the truth that Jesus' death on the cross made things right with God and paid the penalty for our guilt.

Then, and only then, will we know God and respond in gratitude for the indescribable love He showered on us when He sent Jesus to be an atoning sacrifice for our sins.

We gain power to love with God's love only when we have the Spirit living in us. We receive His Spirit at the moment we are reborn. The Spirit enables us to love with a love that comes from God. Only as we live in God, and He in us, can we love with agape love.

The Spirit produces results in our lives as proof that God's love is in us. We know God and that makes our confession of Him true. God's divine love is perfected in us as we have assurance in the Day of Judgment. We grow increasingly confident in who we are in Christ and more and more fearless in our relationships.

All that is impossible to achieve on our own! Agape love is an active love, but it is not primarily an act of kindness, or a comforting word. Nothing we do will come from real love unless it comes from God.

Want to love one another with agape love? It can happen only when we are motivated by Christ's sacrifice for us and are enabled to love by the Holy Spirit.