

1 John 4:7–21 (NRSV)

Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. 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. 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. Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.

By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit. And we have seen and do testify that the Father has sent his Son as the Savior of the world. God abides in those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God, and they abide in God. 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. 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. 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. 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. The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.

Since God Loved Us So Much

A sermon preached at North Prospect Union UCC, Medford, MA

Date: May 3, 2014 Rev. Dudley C. Rose

Scripture: 1 John 4:7–21

Are there more common expressions in the Christian vocabulary? Are there more common expressions in the Christian vocabulary, than these? “God is love,” and “love one another.” And is there a place in the Bible where these ideas are more often declared? Is there a place in the Bible where these ideas are more found than in the Gospel and Letters of John? “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.” “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.” “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.” “I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.” “Whoever loves a brother or sister lives in the light.” 57 times in the Gospel of John and a whopping 46 times in the short First Letter of John we read about love.

These are warm-your-heart verses, warm-your-heart-ideas. These are the verses we learn in Sunday School. At some level I think we all believe that these sentiments contain the key to human flourishing. Love is the answer to nearly every vexing question. If the world could but find love, then the problems that plague the human family would dissolve. If we could but reach deep into our souls and lift up our true, best and loving selves, much that grieves us would be transformed into joy.

If we could just access our best loving selves, then black lives would matter in Ferguson, New York and Baltimore. Palestinians and Israelis would share a homeland. Terrorists would lay down their weapons, drones would be deployed only to deliver your order from Amazon, and we would witness the dawning of the Age of Aquarius. If only we could dig down and bring forth our true, best and loving selves.

Alas, good friends, it only it were so simple. Alas, we are faced with an inconvenient truth. That inconvenient truth isn’t just that such a Utopian vision of the world seems impossible. It actually might not be impossible for a loving world to come about. The inconvenient truth of the human condition, the truth that our faith teaches us (though maybe not in those first years of Sunday School), the inconvenient truth is that when we dig down deep inside our core, we do not find a kernel of unadulterated goodness. We do not find the divine spark the Gnostics thought was there. We do not find that we are at heart goodness and light. Speaking for myself, this is not something I like to hear. We live in an era of self-actualization, self-discovery, and self-admiration. Maybe with a little therapy the goodness of the human spirit will reveal itself.

But our faith and I daresay our experience, our faith and our experience tell a different story. And our faith employs an old-fashioned word to describe what we find at our core. Sin. Oh dear, there goes Rev. Rose. This is the point where we can roll our eyes. Rev. Rose takes a nice subject like love and within five minutes he’s talking about sin. Why in the world would he do that? He’s just told us about the million times the word love is used in the Bible. It’s used over 20 times in this morning’s short passage. Why does Rev. Rose focus an antiquated idea like sin when the passage is about love?

Well, I agree with you. I would rather talk just about love. But the inconvenient truth is that sin real. Our faith teaches that human effort alone, even with good therapy, even with great determination, cannot accomplish perfect love. In an age when we hear a lot about the ill effects of low self-esteem, this insistence that human beings are sinful sounds not only archaic but decidedly unenlightened. And there's good reason for that. More than a few preachers over the years have used the idea of sin to demean and condemn. Too many have grown up in the shadow of denunciation, told that sinfulness is a personal failing. Sin has been used to threaten, judge and to manipulate. No wonder it has such a bad name.

But sin is actually a liberating idea. Sin can help us understand why our best efforts inevitably fall short. As Paul so eloquently puts it in Romans, "For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do." I know about this from experience. Maybe some of you do, too. But Paul then goes on to say, "Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me." Paul says we're off the hook. The comedian Flip Wilson used to say it more, well, flippantly. Flip Wilson used to say, "The Devil made me do it." Understood correctly, sin may improve our self-image. It's not our fault.

But here's the rub. We're weary of Fergusons and New Yorks and Baltimores. We're weary of conflicts in Israel and Palestine, in Syria and Yemen. We're weary of the brutality of Isis and Boko Haram. We're weary of the pain we ourselves cause in our own lives and families. It may help a little to know that we're not entirely at fault. But the world's suffering is palpable, and it may not relieve us to hear that we are powerless to fix it.

Into this human impasse came the Christian faith. Or more properly, into this human impasse came Christ. Or said another way, into this human impasse came God's love. God's Love came into the world. Paul says that he cannot do the good he wants. The Gospel of John tells us that Christ is God's response to this predicament. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son." Listen to what comes next, the Good News. "Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him."

God sent his son into the world to save it, to reverse the curse of sin. Now, the practicalities of this are a little mysterious. Just how does this reversing work? Some people say it's a ticket to heaven. But the Bible seems far more focused on the here and now. Our reading this morning says, "Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another," and then it says this, "Those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also." But how are to love one another any better now than we did before Jesus came?

The mystery of our faith on this point is this. Our reading this morning says that when God sent his Son into the World it was, "not that we loved God but that God loved us." God's love for us, God, came to our rescue completely at God's own initiative, not as a reward for anything we did. Completely out of love for us, God sent love into the world. And that love from God remains in the world in presence of the risen Christ and the Holy Spirit. God's love for us took up residence in the world, and everything. It changed our very being. Are we still without sin? No, Paul was still doing the things he didn't want to, and so do we. But God's love come in the world, dwelling among us has changed and continues to change the possibilities for love in the world.

I think it is sometimes hard for us to grasp or accept this love that God has for us. But it is the linchpin of our faith. So conditioned are we to criticism, so conditioned are we to our own disappointment in ourselves, that the complete and unconditional love of God seems irrational. And, of course, it is. God doesn't love us because it makes sense. God just loves us, loves you

and me, exactly as we are. Think about that. Let it sink in. God just loves us, loves you and me, exactly as we are, and we cannot do anything about it. And here's where the miracle occurs. Once it sinks in that God loves us the way we are, we don't stay the way we were. Once we experience the completely careless and crazy love God has for us, we cannot help but love God in return. And we may begin to see that God has injected us with a love potion, too. God injects us with the ability to love. Where before sin had the last word, now the ability to love, even to love beyond all reason gains its voice. And this new ability makes a difference.

Some of you will remember this. On August 8, 1955 a fourteen-year-old black teenager, Emmett Till, was brutally beaten, mutilated and murdered by two white men in Money, Mississippi. Why? Two days before Emmett Till had spoken to the twenty-one year-old white female proprietor of a store in town. It's fair to say that sin prevailed in Emmett Till's death. Emmett's mother, Mamie, forced the country to look upon the grotesque remains of her son at an open-casket funeral, and she helped spark the civil rights movement.

Emmett's mother spent the remainder of her years, until her death in 2003 at 81, working on civil rights and educating people about what happened to Emmett. Studs Terkel once some years later interviewed Mamie Mobley, for a book he was writing. He asked her if she harbored bitterness toward the two white men, or toward whites generally, for the brutal murder of her son in 1955. This is what she said:

"It certainly would be unnatural not to [hate them], yet I'd have to say I'm unnatural. ... The Lord gave me shield. I don't know how to describe it myself. ... I did not wish them dead. I did not wish them in jail. If I had to, I could take their four little children - they each had two - and I could raise those children as if they were my own, and I could have loved them. ... I believe the Lord meant what he said and try to live according to the way I've been taught."

Now let me be clear. I do not tell this story to suggest that black people ought to be passive in the face of generations of oppression, violence and murder. Mamie Mobley herself was anything but silent. I'm not singling out black people to say that they especially should be loving in the face of all they still face today. I tell this story because if ever there were a person who could not be expected to love those who grievously injured her, it was Emmett Till's mother. I tell this story to say just how unreasonable, irrational and unfathomable is the love that God can inject us with. I tell this story to say that if God's absurd love can live in Mamie Mobley, it can live in us, too. "Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God." Amen.