



First United Church of Oak Park

It Starts With Love

1 John 4: 7-12

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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 the beloved Son into the world so that we might live through him.

In this is love, not that we loved God, but that God loved us and sent the beloved 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 God's love is perfected in us.

I am a pastor in the 21st century. Don't get me wrong, I love my job, but there are times I feel like a travel agent in the age of online booking. This is the secular age! Am I relevant? Or is my vocation completely outmoded? Pointless? Useless? Every need that used to be met by church, folks are finding somewhere else in a shinier format, for a higher price, but without all that "religion baggage."

Obviously, the church is no longer the center of meaning making for most folks in our culture. Being a pastor 75 years ago or so meant placing yourself in the center of a community with regular touchpoints that helped folks tell the story of their lives. Being a pastor then meant having a visible, relevant, and critical role in the community. Ask people what a pastor does or when they would have the need for one nowadays, and people are hard pressed to tell you.

Of course, "God" is in the same boat with us pastors. Who needs God anymore? Who wants to deal in spiritual ideas? Who wants to talk about invisible stuff when literally any material item you could desire will be at your door, in your hands, before your eyes, with free two-day prime shipping? Who needs God, especially when the dominant culture has convinced you that God is a man in the sky you'll never really see or understand, but who probably has it out for you? If you haven't ever questioned the point of this whole thing, you might be due for a spiritual crisis.

But this scripture ... this scripture doesn't say God is a man in the sky who has it out for you. It says God is love. Not God *loves*, not God is loving, but God *is* love. I like that. Even so, love is still invisible. Not a product to package and sell in this commercial culture. It can't be delivered to your door in 48 hours. Maybe all of this *is* outmoded, pointless, useless. Maybe.

It's true; love can't be boxed up and delivered. Love is invisible, but this passage says there is a way to see it. First, it says you can see it through Jesus. Jesus is love's attempt to show itself to the world. Like when wind makes itself visible by animating the trees. Then it says if we understand love by looking at Jesus, then love will animate us too, and we can see it in our own lives. It says love is perfected, or made whole, when it becomes visible through us. I know God is a little out of fashion. I know there are a lot of complaints about the whole God thing. Why would I worship something you can't prove or observe or see ... but what if this scripture is right? What if *God is love* and love is waiting to be made visible ... *in us*?

I recently read a story about a man born in a small midwestern town just after the turn of the 20th century. He was born with significant deformities. When his parents saw him, they rejected him and refused to nurse him or love him at all. Even though they refused to love him, they knew he was their responsibility, and so they hired a young girl, newly immigrated to the States, to do the task they would not, and care for the baby. New to the country and feeling lost, this lonely girl embraced the baby as if he were her very own. For five years, the young girl looked into the baby's eyes with love, spoke to him gently and lovingly, telling him she loved everything about him, even the parts others feared. She would sing to him each and every day, from the very first day she held him, always the same refrain.

Institutions for the sick and disabled became prevalent in the early 20th century, and the boy's parents decided it would be cheaper to place him in an institution than to continue to pay the girl to be his caretaker. She held this now 5-year-old boy close and sang the refrain she had sung every day. She loved him, and now she had to grieve the loss of the child she raised as he was taken from her and put in a cold institution. He was treated harshly in this asylum, treated as if the deformity in his face meant his spirit and mind were not whole. He grew, and under the burden of his suffering, soon his memories of the young girl who loved him until age 5 began to fade until all he could remember was her name.

When he turned 18, he had a plan. He was of age and he would check himself out of the asylum. He walked up the tallest hill he could find, with pills in his pocket. He had saved up these pills with a plan to end his misery. As he sat on top of the hill preparing to swallow the pills and end the hell he had been living, he thought about how unwanted he was and how unlovable. He shouted out "Why, God? Why do you hate me? You never cared about me! I'll do you a favor and end this!" As he reached for the pills and

got ready to throw them to the back of his throat, he was interrupted by the sound of singing. There was someone behind him. He turned to look. The voice was so clear. He heard the words of the song ... "God's mercy is wide, God's love is deep, and you, dear child, are loved." Even though the voice was right there next to him, he saw that he was completely alone ... but he heard the song again ... "God's mercy is wide, God's love is deep, and you, dear child, are loved." This had to be the voice of God ... he put the pills in his pocket and walked back down the hill.

Wanting to understand what this all meant, the boy became a pastor. He pastored for 50 years, helping others discern God at work in their lives, but even now in his 70s, he couldn't make sense of the singing he heard that day on the hill that called him loved and brought him back from the brink of death. That voice was so clear ... he wasn't alone ... but he didn't see anyone there.

As he aged, he prepared for death once more, but this time with a sense of gratitude for the blessings of his life. He happened to hear that that name he had held onto since he was 5 years old, that young girl who had been the only love he'd known for the first 20 or more years of his life, was still alive. He had never tried to reconnect with her. He didn't remember anything about her! What would he say? So his wife contacted her and made arrangements for a visit. When she arrived, she was a complete stranger, except she wasn't at all. The look on her face transcended time and space and he felt like he was 5 years old again, basking in her love and warmth. They sat and reminisced. She held his hand and told him she had never felt like she had a calling like she felt the call to care for him as a child. She shared how much she loved him and cared for him.

And then, still holding his hand, she said, "Do you remember what I used to sing to you?" He admitted he didn't. He had no idea. Quietly, she sang, "God's mercy is wide, God's love is deep, and you, dear child, are loved." It shook him, and he felt himself back on that hilltop at age 18 preparing to end his misery ... it was her song ... God's voice speaking to him had come directly through her. That is what had saved him ... brought him back from the brink of death. He *had* seen God ... it was the love in her eyes and the message of her song. He saw God ... love ... right there holding his hand.

God is love. No one has ever seen God, but if we love one another, God lives in us, and God's love is perfected *in us* ...

I don't know. Maybe there's still a use for this God thing in the 21st century after all. In a world of injustice and fear; in a world of pandemic and death; in a world that worships wealth and power and whiteness and greed as its gods ... letting *love* be God ... letting love be what animates us and becomes visible through us ... giving *love* the name we only give to whatever is of utmost importance and power in our lives ... a name that would make it clear *this* is the only thing we believe is worthy of our worship ... claiming that God is love and that love will be our God ... that doesn't seem so outmoded, or

useless, or pointless after all. That might be cutting edge these days. That very well may be *exactly* what the world needs ... even now.