

Becoming Love

Hosea 11:1-4, 8 1John 4:7-10, 16-19

This morning I'm finishing a short series on faith, hope and love. As 1Corinthians 13 tells us: "...the greatest of these is love," which is why we're taking two weeks on it. Although it deserves an entire series because love is the most prominent theme in the Bible from Genesis to Revelation.

The Old Testament contains as much about God's love as the New Testament. Some people don't read the Old Testament because they assume it's only about judgement and an angry God. We prefer the NT because it appears that Jesus is a nicer face of God. But if you put on your Christ-colored glasses and read the Old Testament and with an eye for the passages about God's love, you'll be surprised how frequently it's talked about. It takes a little more effort because there are cultural and language differences to wade through, but it's there. A lot! Even if the people of old didn't say "God is love" (like we're about to hear), and didn't name God as such, there was enough *experience* of God's heart of love in their time and culture that it was recorded and proclaimed in the Old Testament.

That's why I chose that beautiful poetic passage from the prophet Hosea—and the words of assurance from Jeremiah. God loves and longs for his people.

And that truth is expressed beautifully in much of the Old Testament. And, of course, the New Testament, to which we now turn...

1 John 4:7-10

⁷ Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. ⁸Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. ⁹God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. ¹⁰In 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.

16-19

God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. ¹⁷Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness on the day of judgement, because as he is, so are we in this world. ¹⁸There 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. ¹⁹We love because he first loved us.

This is the word of the Lord.

Let's do some simple math. Transitive equation: If $A=B$, and $B=C$, then A must equal C , right? Let's apply this to our understanding of God, and us. If God is love, and Jesus is God, then Jesus is love. Make sense? Same with the Holy Spirit (also being love). Now, one more part of the equation: if the triune God is love, and we are created in the image and likeness of the triune God, then... we also are love. Or, at least made to love, because we are made in Love's image.

Love isn't just something we do or feel from time to time; it's who we are—or at least what we are to live into. We are love. Made in the image and likeness of love. That may not always ring true in our experience, but the very least we are created with the built-in capacity to love. The apostle John puts it this way: "As he (Jesus) is, so are we in this world." With love in our DNA as we go about. It's built in because we are made in the image of God.

Now, somewhere along the way our DNA may have been altered or gone dormant, but with grace and healing we can become who we were created to be.

Before getting into more detail about that, I want to dwell for a moment on John's affirmation that God is love. He says it at least twice here, and it's affirmed in other places. God... is... love. That is a profound statement.

John doesn't say: God *loves...* or *is loving*, as if it's something that God does, because he's God and he's supposed to. John says, God **IS** love. The essence of God is love. What God is made of is love.

And when John writes, "God is love" that was an earthquake in the history of religious thought. Up to that time, God had been a lot of things: God was holy. God was powerful and almighty. God was righteous. God was ticked off. But God is love? That was a brand-new idea.

And even today, as much as we may have read our Bibles and have sung “Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so,” I’m not sure most people, even good church people, truly believe it, or fully understand what it means. For many, God is still seen as demanding, or distant, or something other than love. God is getting misrepresented all over the place today. And we need to recover the notion that God is love. And along with it, that we, being in made in God’s image and likeness, are love. Love that goes beyond forced righteousness, and also beyond just feelings and warm fuzzies, to become love that acts with grace and kindness; love that does what’s best for another, whoever they are.

While there could be an entire sermon series on this topic of love, this morning I’d like to reflect on just one more aspect of this love, as communicated to us from our readings this morning. There is nothing really new here, but hopefully a helpful reminder for us, especially during this time in our country when people are anxious, afraid, angry, and disillusioned. We need to be people who love well, not just for the sake of those in need, obviously, and not just for those close to us, but also because we need to build bridges rather than barriers in our neighborhoods and our communities and our workplaces. And that’s what love does: love builds bridges, not barriers. So here is what I’d like to put forth for us:

Love sees the image of God in others, and therefore shows no partiality.

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The apostle John talks about love being perfected in us, which doesn't mean flawless as much as it means maturing. Grown up—or growing up. Love that sees the image of God in others, and shows no partiality.

We human beings are pretty good at analyzing, then categorizing others. Psychologists say that within one minute of interacting with someone we typically have already begun to decide if this is someone I like or don't like, if I agree with them or disagree, and then we have these silos where we place people (in our minds)—we begin to label people and put them into categories: life of the party, socially awkward, minority, socialist, gay, evangelical, etc.

This is convenient. It's easier to categorize, and then shrug off responsibility for taking steps toward someone in compassion and love. You know, if they're one of 'those' people, I'm off the hook. But only if I believe that God sees them the same way I do!

I suppose this analyzing and categorizing comes from a built-in instinct for survival from our hunter-gatherer days where we had to protect ourselves and our families from real threats. We needed to make judgements about friend or foe, who was a threat and who wasn't. *But we don't need those judgments*

anymore! Not on a regular day-to day basis at least. Although, for black folks going into supermarkets now, after the shooting in Buffalo, the threat feels real. They are, understandably, on high alert. And probably for kids and parents going to school. But this shouldn't have to be.

This, by the way, is why fear mongering by politicians is actually a regressive form of influencing people—you know, where you need to see someone who is different from you as a potential threat; where you or your family's life or well-being may be in danger. To this John says, "There is no fear in love; rather, mature love casts out fear." But fear gets used anyway because, unfortunately, it works—it appeals to base instincts. Love is supposed to mature us beyond old regressive impulses. And certainly beyond fear.

One of my preaching instructors at Fuller seminary was a man named Bill Pannell. He is an African American man that I just found out recently (in an alumni publication) was friends with the likes of John Perkins and John Lewis and was part of the civil rights movement in the 60's and 70's; he rarely if ever talked about that though. Dr. Pannell was wonderful to have as a preaching professor because he would sit in the back of the class and listen to us practice our sermons, which were typically pretty bad; we hadn't honed our skills/craft yet so I'm sure it was painful to listen to them. But he was great because he would

listen to our attempts at sermons and say, “Mmm, mmm, my, my; okay, preach it,” and once in a while we’d get an ‘amen’ if we said something that made sense. He was a great encouragement.

Something he said one day made a strong impression on me, and it came through some feedback he gave to one student who, during their sermon, was categorizing and labeling people they thought of as sinners—all of the different types of sinners. After giving some helpful feedback Dr. Pannell began to do a little preaching of his own, which he sometimes did, and he said, “The ugliest 4 letter word in the English vocabulary is ‘them.’ It’s a word that separates and divides.” And he told a little story of being in a group of folks working on racial reconciliation and a well-intentioned caucasian person asked an African American woman a question. She asked, “Do you prefer to be called African American, Negro, or Black?” The woman looked at her and smiled and said, “I think I’d just like to be called Olivia.” We need face-to-face encounters where we call people by name, not by a label. Not “them.”

The call of love—from God and from within ourselves—is the call to see the image of God in others, to see past peoples’ personas, and to show no partiality in how we treat people, especially those who might be considered “other than” us. Whether their otherness is a difference in economics, or physical ability, or

appearance, or age, or ethnicity. And, even when it's someone we disagree with, or even dislike. Even they bear the image of God!

Our Presbyterian founding father, John Calvin, who is thought of as dwelling mainly on how wretched we are as miserable sinners, total depravity and all that (and his reputation was probably well-earned), actually had some things to say about the beauty and original goodness of humans, because we are made in the image of God. Let me read one of his quotes:

“Humans contain within themselves enough miracles to occupy our minds...” “The gift of God’s image is present in every person. This creational principle stresses the worthiness of the human being. It is not the will of God that we should forget the primeval dignity which God bestowed on our first parents – a dignity which may well stimulate us to the pursuit of goodness, love and justice.”

Okay, John Calvin. Well done. That's a wonderful affirmation. I wish he would've spent more time on that than on order, discipline and depravity; but this is good to hear, and it's worth reflecting on and finding ways to put it into practice.

Love sees the image of God in others and shows no partiality. The great Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoyevsky: “To love a person is to see them as God intended them to be.” That, too, takes some time and effort!

Last week, we talked about a couple takeaways, based on Jesus' reiteration of the commandment to love our neighbors as ourselves: which assumes first,

that we will love ourselves, so we can reflect on how we're doing that; to see ourselves as God sees us, and love ourselves unconditionally as God does. And then ask, who needs love? And be proactive about that and not just reactive. Ask "Who needs love?" and then find an action step or two we can take.

Here is one more something we can do. Simple, easy.

If you don't already do this, try it as an experiment: for one week, smile at everyone you see, and then try, if possible, to say something kind/affirming/friendly to them. Think about it ahead of time and write down what you'll say. Or, have a repertoire of things to say. And then simply smile at people. I guarantee you that most people will smile back. Even if they don't, make the decision to smile. And when you do that, you've begun to build a bridge.

Mother Teresa again (I'm finding myself quoting her a lot lately): "Peace begins with a smile. Let us always meet each other with a smile, because a smile is the beginning of love. Some people came to Calcutta, and before leaving, they begged me: 'Tell us something that will help us to live our lives better.' And I said: 'Smile at each other; smile at your wife, smile at your husband, smile at your children and grandchildren. Smile at each other—it doesn't matter who it is—and that will help you grow up in greater love for each other.' And then one of them

asked me, 'Are you married?' and I said: 'Yes, and I find it difficult sometimes to smile at Jesus.' And it is true, Jesus can be very demanding also, and it is at those times when he is so demanding that to give him a big smile is very beautiful."

So there you go. You can smile even at Jesus, especially when he calls us to do difficult things.

Let me give you a pre-benediction blessing from the apostle Paul in Ephesians 3:16-19:

I pray that out of God's glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, ¹⁷so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and grounded in love, ¹⁸may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, ¹⁹and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.

...that we may grow in love, and become love, for the sake of others.

Song: The Gift of Love (paraphrase of 1Cor.13)