

Love
1 John 1:1–10
Wake Forest Baptist Church
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April 19, 2009

At first hearing our scripture read, it might not have been clear why Love is my sermon title. We heard about life, about joy, about light versus darkness, about sin and truth. Well, just trust me; we'll get to love in a bit. Though 1 John is labeled an epistle, it doesn't carry the marks characteristic of the other letters written and included in the New Testament Canon, indeed, it reads somewhat like a sermon. And though it carries the name of the apostle John, and shares similarities in language with the gospel of John, there's no certainty about its authorship. Possibly written in Ephesus – present-day Turkey – it immediately tells listeners and readers that it has been written so that “our joy may be complete.”

Were we to read the full 5 chapters of 1 John (and I'd invite you to do so as I'll be back to this text in a couple of weeks), we'd find that it seems to be directed against a group of believers whose views about Jesus had deviated from what the author believes is the truth regarding Jesus and God. Given that it was probably written 70 or 80 years after Jesus' crucifixion, Christianity was experiencing significant growing pains and there were tensions in trying to work out what was going to continue to be taught about Jesus and about God.

At least one of the problems with the heretical group about whom the author is concerned is that they were probably suggesting that Jesus had not been fully human, which is why the writer(s) begins with a rather adamant statement that reinforces the physical senses of hearing, vision and touch. “We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life...” (1:1ff)

Regardless of the differences of opinion with this heretical group, the author(s) of 1 John is clear about one concept being at the center of any teaching about Jesus – and we find it mentioned 33 times in the book. “For this is the message you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another.” (3:11) The writer(s) continues: “We know that we have passed from death to life because we love one another. Whoever does not love abides in death. All who hate a brother or sister are murderers, and you know that murderers do not have eternal life abiding in them. We know love by this, that Jesus laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another.” (3:14–16)

The exhortations about love continue with a frequency that explains why this is often called the Book of Love.

Love. Close your eyes and think about that word.

When we hear the word, we probably have a variety of thoughts, feelings, and mental images that flood through our minds. Maybe we thought first of the person we love the most. Maybe we thought of our children, and how much we adore them or of our parents and the love they show us. We perhaps feel happy at hearing the word, or, if we have recently been hurt by a loved one, the word may feel like salt sprinkled on a wound. Some may remember faces of loved ones who have died, or have thought of those we loved but who never loved us in return.

Love. How many thousands of songs, poems and books have the word love in the title? How many tens of thousands of songs, poems and books focus on the subject of love? Strong's Concordance of the Bible lists around 550 instances of the word love, or variations thereof. No doubt millions of sermons have focused on love.

Yet for all our talk about love, we seem not to know how to execute love very well. Of course, the truth or falsity of that statement depends on one's definition of love, which brings us back to why there have been so many books and articles written on the subject of love! Are we talking about romantic love, "brotherly" love, love of parent to child, "Christian" love?

Most of you have heard sermons that delineate the differences among the Greek words translated into English as love, namely, *philia* – basically, love between friends, *eros* – a more intimate and sensuous love, and *agape* – often described as self-sacrificing love. Many theologians have discussed the differences in these forms of love, and it has often been the case that *agape* was held up as pure self-sacrifice. The ultimate self-sacrifice, they say, was that of God who loved humans who are unworthy to be loved, a sacrifice borne out by sending Jesus to death to atone for the sins of humanity.

Reinhold Niebuhr wrote that *agape's* self-sacrifice was the key, but then ran into trouble when looking at the private versus public spheres of life. *Agape* was for one's private life, and justice was what one aimed for in the public sphere because, he argued, you just can't do sacrificial love in the public sphere. Of course, self-sacrifice can be dangerous, even if only in private relationships. If one gives of oneself without regard for his/her needs, it can result in the person never living fully into his/her own life. Women have often experienced that inability to become fully realized because society has tended to assume females will be more self-sacrificial, putting off careers, giving most of their time to the pursuits of other family members, etc. Some believe extreme self-sacrifice can cause women to believe they should stay with in abusive relationships...give, even when it hurts.

What feminist theologians began exploring is what it might look like for love to be mutual, that is, where the parties in a relationship, public or private, treat each other with respect, affirming that each party can both give and receive *agape*. That probably still sounds like a radical notion to some because it's not often what we experience. It may feel more comfortable to think of mutuality in an intimate relationship, but why in the world would we want to have public relationships with that sort of potential for vulnerability?

For the moment, let's just think about how Christians talk to each other in the public sphere, because we all like to think we live into the admonition of 1 John: "For this

is the message you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another.”
(3:11)

When I returned from vacation, I spent some time catching up on news from various sources. I was deeply saddened to read the story of Carl Joseph Walker-Hoover, an 11 year-old student who killed himself a few days before his 12th birthday. Carl had been being bullied by other students at his school in Massachusetts. Though his parents were aware of the bullying and had asked the school to take action, officials offered lots of excuses, blaming Carl in that he refused to identify the offenders. He told his parents that the bullying would only get worse if he gave names. The school also suggested that this was just a phase, and that “kids are just being kids.”

Clearly the most painful epithets hurled at him were anti-gay slurs. Carl was an excellent student, played both baseball and football, loved his church, and had a very close-knit caring family. Ultimately, he could not face the daily harassment, wrapping an electrical extension cord around his neck and hanging himself just shortly before the family was to sit down to dinner one evening earlier this month. As if this death were not awful enough, the news of his suicide triggered reports of other suicides.

Eric Mohat, a 14 year-old, also killed himself after repeated harassment. His parents are suing their school system in Ohio because they argue that the system would not do enough to stop the bullying. They aren't asking for a financial settlement; they are suing to get laws changed so that other students won't face a similar fate. And there have been several other suicides of young students in similar situations this year.

It might seem obvious to many of us that the loving thing to do in such circumstances is to do whatever it takes to help kids understand that bullying, and particularly bullying around gender identity or sexual orientation – because of continuing stigma – is not a good thing and will not be tolerated. And I single out these distinctions not because I think they deserve a higher level of attention to the exclusion of other slurs, but because there are still many adults in school settings who do not find anti-gay name-calling a problem because they believe gay persons are violating God's law. For those persons, “love” may be achieved because perhaps the bullying can be a helpful corrective, letting kids know that they are not doing what God would want them to do.

If you think that's an overstated perspective, consider this: A number of states are trying to pass laws that deal with bullying. What many states have found, as was found during the civil rights era, it is important to specifically name what you are trying to correct. So just as it was not effective to say no one should discriminate in 1950's without specifically naming the racial discrimination that was not to take place, likewise, it is not effective to leave out the categories that name the kind of bullying that has been so damaging as to cause kids to kill themselves.

Here in North Carolina, 23 of our 115 school systems have anti-bullying policies that specifically list those categories from race to sexual orientation; Winston-Salem/Forsyth County is NOT among them. I was part of a group that tried, several years ago, to convince our school system to make the change. We brought in students to tell their

stories, presented data students had gathered on the frequency of anti-gay slurs, and yet the thing dissenters focused on was that to list gender identity or sexual orientation was unnecessary; all bullying should be treated the same. I agree, except that that's not what is really happening. In one school, a teacher actually told a student that she might go to hell if she were really a lesbian. Most teachers are wonderful, salt-of-the-earth people who deserve our great thanks for the work they do. But just as some people found nothing wrong with calling African-Americans the "n" word because they found them to be sub-human, so, too, are there those who are fine with anti-gay slurs, even against children.

Now, there's a bill in committee in the North Carolina legislature that would require all 115 local school systems to deal with bullying in very concrete ways, but opponents are arguing that listing those categories is not important because, they argue, listing gender identity or sexual orientation would be giving special rights to gay students, or students perceived to be gay.

That's their Christian version of "love."

As the wonderful theologian Howard Thurman wrote in *Jesus and the Disinherited*, it is often the case that "love" as expressed by the privileged to the less-privileged doesn't feel like love, doesn't feel good or healthy. The privileged often assume they know best for minorities; they'll be the ones to decide what's loving, thank you very much!

And, it is too easy for people in both groups to stereotype the other, and assume that just because of the particularities of race, gender, orientation, etc., that we know all there is to know about another.

I typically watch news for an hour or so each morning as I'm checking email and preparing to start the day. On the morning after the shooting of the pirates who had hijacked the Maersk ship and taken the captain hostage, there was an interesting interchange among the newscasters on MSNBC. One, a woman, said simply that she felt sorry for the pirates because there must be real desperation in their lives causing them to do the things they do. Several of the other folks on air with her began attacking her statement and her, saying that she was soft, and that she was silly for feeling sorry for the deaths of these men whom they labeled terrorists.

If that situation had been approached from the standpoint of love of another, (and if that had taken cares years ago when the problem actually began) how should it have been handled? Indeed, how should any conflict be handled whether it be on a large-scale as our wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, or on a smaller-scale where school children are taking their own lives? Are we to be seen as naïve for wanting to reason our ways through situations to find a loving response that keeps people alive and keeps violence from seeming to be the only solution?

Thurman has written that the poison that infiltrates us all when we allow walls to separate us can only be neutralized by actually seeing others as human. Until we can really look at another as an individual rather than as a representative of a group, we have no hope

at the reconciliation and the mutual understanding that would be needed in order for love, real love, to take root.

Love is not a feeling. Love is an act.

On Thursday evening I attended my first CHANGE Strategy Team meeting since having been invited to join that group. After the meeting ended, Sharee Fowler, who is doing PhD work that focuses on this organization, asked to speak to as many of us as could stay. She only asked a few simple questions, but the responses from around the table were quite profound.

The questions related to people's experiences as residents of this city, before and after CHANGE began here. Folks white and black, Christian and non, talked about how amazing it had been to get to know people outside their normal communities. Not surprisingly, the minorities in the room related how different it felt to actually believe they had the ability to influence the typical power brokers, and that they had never felt more alive in the community than they did now. Several had just returned from Raleigh and a day spent lobbying local legislators, and they spoke of how they knew their parents could have never imagined them being taken seriously by state politicians, or have been asked to stand and be recognized by the legislature while it was in session. It was a sacred moment listening to those stories. The poisons of the past had been drained away by people seeing each other as people, taking time to listen to each others' stories, and learn from each others' experiences.

Love is not a feeling. Love is an act. It requires us to be real and present to each other. Feminist theologian Carter Heyward, in *Passion for Justice*, says it this way: "We are not automatic lovers of self, others, world, or God. Love does not just happen. We are not love machines, puppets on the strings of a deity called "love." Love is a choice – not simply, or necessarily, a rational choice, but rather a willingness to be present to others without pretense or guile. Love is a conversion to humanity – a willingness to participate with others in the healing of a broken world and broken lives."

Jesus taught us how to live lives where we do make the commitment to be loving, and because we are human, that commitment cannot only be cerebral – it must be tactile; it must take place person to person. As the writer of 1 John begins, "We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life — this life was revealed, and we have seen it and testify to it, and declare to you the eternal life that was with God and was revealed to us — we declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with God and with the Son Jesus Christ. We are writing these things so that our joy may be complete." (1:1–4)

Without love, there is no joy. Without fellowship, there is no opportunity for love to take root and grow. May God give us the strength to open our ears, clear our sight, and reach out to others in love. Amen.