

All You Need

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1 John 4:7-5:5

Beloved, we are God's children, and we are held in the grip of that love. A pastor friend of mine posted this on Facebook a few days ago: "So what do you say about 'God is Love' that doesn't sound either trite or heretical?"

Great question. We're surrounded by ephemeral visions of our culture's ideal of love, with any deviation from that being anything from quaint to bizarre to unacceptable. Judging from TV, we would learn that "Love" is sex between one man and one woman, beginning around the third date, and ending when either partner finds someone more interesting. Our culture tells us that chastity, fidelity, same-gender attraction and relationships based on more than just physical intimacy are abnormal. So a man being a 40-year old virgin is hilarious. Comedians still routinely crack gay jokes. Marriages in Hollywood that last longer than 24 months are regarded as miracles.

On the other side, we're met with a vision of what it means to be loved by God and to love God. The American ideal seems to be some kind of a combination — we get an image of quasi-romantic love with Jesus in Christian pop music, combined with the image of God as Father (yes, the popular image is always as Father) with ourselves as helpless infants in his arms. All we can do is coo and cry, and God takes care of our needs.

Indeed, with these visions of what human and divine love is, being trite and heretical isn't an unreasonable fear. What strikes me from 1 John, however,

is that the relationship metaphors that culture gives us are inadequate. I would suggest that rather than viewing Jesus as romantic lover, we are to view him as our beloved brother. And rather than viewing ourselves as helpless infants in God's arms, we should view ourselves as growing, adult children — capable of choosing our actions and responses and determining what our response to our parent will be.

The scripture passage begins with an assurance that “Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God.” At first blush, this is a rather lovely (and perhaps, trite) assurance. After all, how many humans are there that are genuinely incapable of love? And if that is the case, doesn't that mean that everyone is born of God and knows God? But the passage goes on to say that God sent her son into the world so that we might live through him. And later we are instructed how to tell if we live in God. I think there is a distinction here between being born, which is essentially passive for the child, and how we live, which requires an active commitment. As such, I would argue that everyone born is like the helpless infant held in God's arms. But that infant inevitably grows up and must determine how to respond to the ongoing and unflappable love of God our parent.

We are all children of God, but we choose whether or not we want to act the part. Embracing that relationship — acting as God's children — means that we look to Jesus as our older brother. God gives us birth, and it is Jesus who teaches us to walk. Only when we walk with Christ do we live out the love of God.

This love is neither cheap nor simple. To preach that we must love God while at the same time preaching contempt for anyone or for God's creation is hypocrisy. We are welcomed into a full participation in God's love by embodying it for others. This can not be done with reservations or exceptions. I can not tell you to love God while at the same time harboring hatred. I cannot even hate those whom I consider hate-mongers, which is frustrating!

But in the example of Jesus, we see neither a return of hatred for hatred, nor a passive absorption of that hatred. We see a transformative response of passionate love. Love that could be angry enough to overturn tables rather than participate in the unjust temple economic system (I imagine this as something like flushing a drug-dealer's stash down a toilet.). Love courageous enough to heal the daughter of an "enemy" soldier. Love so profound that some of his last words were of forgiveness for his murderers. Love so perfect that it transforms death into new life.

How do we translate that love into our own realities? It begins in the pews. The people sitting to your left and right, in front or behind you, are your brothers and sisters. These are the people with whom we learn to walk. Our love for God is not something to be experienced or practiced simply on an individual level. My relationship to God does not take place in isolation, because I cannot see God. In order to love God the parent, I must love my brothers and sisters.

If it is just "God and me" then the relationship is meaningless. God loves me no less, but my love-songs to God are like clanging cymbals. Only in as much as I love those around me do I love God. And because God is not seen, God's

love is known through the love of others. It is through those around us that we come to find the form of God's love for us. And it is through us that others might name God's love for the first time.

Naturally, the most frightening part of this passage is the verses about fear: "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."

How do I love without fear? Love requires a level of vulnerability — a willingness to invite scrutiny of our innermost being. When that love is not reciprocated or is rejected, there is genuine pain. I remember high school and the vulnerability of dating — the unreturned phone calls; the dreaded phrase, "Just friends..." How is fear the wrong response to that?

I think the key lies in understanding who in these sentences is the Lover and who is the Beloved. In referring to judgment, we are to look to God as the Lover; the one who loves. We are the Beloved; the one who receives love. And God's love for us is unconditional. We never need to fear God's rejection. The Lover is defined by love; the Beloved is defined as being the object of that love. We need not fear God's rejection.

It is God who is vulnerable in this equation, not us. Though God will not reject us, all too frequently we reject God. So we, the Beloved, can receive God's love without fear. This is the ideal of parental love as well: no matter how far a child wanders, the parent still loves the child. No child should live in fear of

rejection by their parents, although far too many do. This is what the prodigal son learned upon returning to his father. Though the son feared to return home, his fears were unfounded. The father's love did not waver, despite the son's wandering.

This passage about fear ends with the verse, "We love because God first loved us." What we learn here is first, how to be the fearless Beloved of God, and second, how to be the vulnerable Lover. This is a passage about the combination of love and power — we are instructed to not use our love as a weapon. We are to love in such a way that others do not fear our judgment or rejection. This isn't to say that we don't hope, pray and help people to change or grow — or that we ignore or simply absorb offenses.

Such responses, though, should not inspire fear, but should come from a genuine concern for a person's well-being. And if we love with this kind of love, a person would never fear that our love was contingent upon their change. Perhaps we can even aspire to end or change unhealthy relationships in loving ways by not using our love as a weapon, or withholding it as a punishment.

Love is at once fulfilling and frustrating; exhilarating and exhausting; delightful and dangerous; forceful and fragile (and many other alliterative things). We consistently fail in our attempts to reflect God's love in our human relationships. But God's love for us is unending, even when we feel inadequate. Therefore, "beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God."