

“God Is Love”

1 John 4:7-16

The Rev. Dr. Andrew L. McDonald

The House of Hope Presbyterian Church

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This passage changed my life. I used to think church, the Bible, and God, were just kind of... there. Boring. Then one day my cousin, Penelope, who at that point in her life was sort of a Jesus freak, sent me a poster. It was in the artistic style of Peter Max, which means lots of pretty mild colors. In this design: all sorts of phrases from this passage in John. There at the center, the biggest font of all, it said: “God is love.” Somehow, before that, I had not gotten the memo. I missed the point. That hippy poster changed my life. Thank you Penelope.

God Is Love

We just can't spent enough time pondering what that means. It opens us up to ideas of love all over the place. Robert Sternberg, a psychologist who studies marriage, advocates for the importance of stories in our relationship. “Each of us has an ideal story about love, it may be the most important thing we can learn about ourselves.”

One of Native American tribes has a story that says something that fits with that. Once there was a young woman, the most enchanting woman in the tribe. All the young men sought to win her attention, but she was not interested. Then one day a stranger came to their tribe (it was Trickster). He was very handsome. And he had peppers on his belt. And he could dance the most wonderful dance. She noticed him, but kept her distance. They talked and became friends. Then one day he invited her to go with him into the forest. She went, but held back a distance. They came to a big rock cliff, but he showed her there was a secret entrance to a cave. He went in and invited her to follow. She held back. But then she thought of his wonderful face and the peppers. And his wonderful dance. So she went in. And she found that inside the cave was a world that was larger and more beautiful than the one she left behind.

So what story do you live in? We as Christians have been given the story that is summarized in our passage from 1 John: “God is love.” That is our story. When we enter into this world that is larger and more open to love than anything else we can know. It opens us up to all sorts of insights to the meaning of love. We see insights into love in so many places.

The ancient poet, Ovid, writes: “Fortune and love favor the brave.” Which means that risking love is an act of heroism.

H. Jackson Brown: "Sometimes the heart sees what is invisible to the eye."

Blaise Pascal: "When we are in love, we seem to ourselves quite different from what we were before."

Psychologist Eric Fromm: "Love is the only sane and satisfactory answer to the problem of human existence."

Novelist Zora Neale Hurston: "Love is what makes your soul crawl out from its hiding place."

The great philosopher Audrey Hepburn: "The best thing to hold onto in life is each other."

Painter Marc Chagall: "There is a single color, as on an artist's palette, which provides the meaning of life... It is the color... of love." All these people exploring the dimensions of what love is about: Love gives us vision, renewal, courage, companionship, meaning. But whatever became of love? It used to be talked about a lot. Musicians used to sing about it. City parks used to have statues that embodied it. Philosophers and theologians debated about it. Love was part of what we heard about often. Sure, often in shallow ways, but sometimes in ways there were deep, thought provoking.

Reinhold Niebuhr talked about love as the paradox of the impossible possibility. Then, love seemed to disappear. Where did love go? Love went into eclipse. What will it take for love to come back into our public life?

People have become more cynical. Hyper-Realism that has no place for romanticism. Love does not present itself as something that debaters can scream about at each other on Fox news. People have become more self-centered. Social media has a shallowness of communication, so people feel less deeply connected, and more isolated. If love is talked about at all, it is merely a private value. People are more nihilistic: anything goes. When we are not able to judge anyone else, we end up with the feeling/belief that all standards are equal. People crave excitement: so violence, sex, buying something crowds out love.

The bottom line is: We gave up on love. But what if love did not give up on us? That is our experience as Christians. At the heart of reality is God. And God is love.

With love out of the public conversation, it becomes painfully evident: While love may be the best thing in love, love is not a given. Even more so, love is not our default drive, preloaded and predetermined. We are not hard-wired to love. Love is only a potential. It is up to us to find the sources that teach and allow us to know what love is all about.

We learn. Our experience as Christians: What is most real to us: is the overarching, comprehensive experience that God is love. God is what is most real. At the heart of our experience is this: we are loved. The Bible is primarily not about a particular history as much as it is about people's experience of the character of God.

Who is God?
Who are you?

If God is love, then how have you chosen to respond to that love? God is the external spark that ignites our passion for living. Ethicist Timothy Jackson writes: "God's moral nature empowers human nature." "The better we understand God's nature, the more we open ourselves to it, and the more we become like it.

Jesus embodies love: that is the image of his whole life. From giving an outrageous amount of wine as a wedding gift, to confronting that social leper, Zaccheus, and says: "Hey Zaccheus, I'm staying at your house tonight." To asking hard questions: like when he asked the lame man: "Do you WANT to be healed?" Look at the trajectory of Jesus on love: Love one another. Love your neighbor as yourself. Love your enemies.

The followers of Jesus keep moving in that trajectory: "The fruit of the Spirit is love. "God's love has been poured into our hearts." "God's love is this, while we were sinners, Christ died for us." "Neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ our Lord." (Romans 8:38—39)

Love is the law: it governs us.
Love is our house we live in.
Love is our spark: it animates us.
Love is what courses through our veins: it gives us life.

Image after image after image. The Bible is the story of the God of love. Gerhard Kittel edited these huge, fat Greek dictionaries detailing the in depth the meaning of every word in the Bible. When it comes to agape, love, Kittel, writes: The genius of the people of the Bible Is their discovery that, in the grace of God, whenever they were lost they could always find their way by the thought of love.

Love is a potential which we experience, and learn. But there is another step: we have to choose. Or as Martin Luther King phrased it: We have to develop the will to love. There is a freedom that we have. Robert Fulghum saw a sign in a restaurant. The sign immediately made it his favorite place to eat. The sign said: "We reserve the right to serve only those IN love, those who HAVE BEEN in love, Or those who WANT TO BE in love." In an atmosphere like that, how could the food NOT taste wonderful?

Love is a choice. We are all headed on trajectories from the stories we live in. What is your story? Do you know the story about the wrathful man? A guy who, if you told him not to do something, would do the opposite? Someone told him he was too old to parachute. It made him mad, so he went to the airport, and bullied someone into taking him up in a plane. He was told, don't put on THAT parachute. It made him mad, so he put it on anyway. Don't open that door! Made him mad, so he opened the door.

Don't jump! So he jumped. Then he pulled the rip cord. Nothing happened. Pulled the emergency cord. Nothing happened. He looks down, and sees someone coming up at him, Looks like the other guy is riding on top of a missile. He hollers: "Hey, Do you know how to work a parachute?" The other guy hollers back: "No! Do you know how to fix a water heater?" We are headed on trajectories. Our stories not only shape us, then send us in particular directions. Make sure your trajectory is headed toward the love of God and love of neighbor.

The great theologian H. Richard Niebuhr believed the goal of the church is to increase our love of God and our neighbor. These two are inseparable ideas. Love is about attitudes and actions. Niebuhr wrote about love of God and neighbor in the most tender way: in the metaphor of falling in love. Let me paraphrase what he said: Love is rejoicing in the presence of the one you love. Celebrating the miracle that they exist. Love is desiring their being. Longing for their presence when they are absent. Experiencing happiness in simply thinking about them.

Love shows no jealousy: Just profound satisfaction over everything that makes them great and glorious. Love is not about competition: just a sense of wonder over the gift of the beloved's companionship. And Gratitude that the one we love exists.

Love is reverence: deep respect: In which you are drawn near, and yet you keep a distance, for fear of stepping over boundaries that would diminish the other. You don't want to absorb the one you love and make them exactly like you, and you don't want to be absorbed, and become like them: You just want to experience the mystery in the otherness of the other.

Love is loyalty: the willingness to let the self be destroyed rather than that the beloved cease to be. And when you are in love, what they care about, you care about, their cause is your cause, their vision becomes your vision. I find Niebuhr's thoughts the most profound and touching words On the love of God and neighbor that I have ever come across.

Loving God is like the supreme experience of love. To be truly wise, you have to have knowledge of love of God, neighbor and self. They are interconnected (The Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry, p. 113).

When you fall in love, it changes you. You are not the same person afterwards. The experience of love shapes you: You become connected to a broader world. Your identity changes. I want to share with you the story about Duane. This is a true story.

Duane was the son of Rollin and Selma. Duane grew up on a farm during the Great Depression. They considered themselves lucky: they had a roof over their heads, Food enough to eat, And a truck for hauling farm supplies. They did not consider themselves deprived to not have luxuries like electricity or indoor plumbing. Duane was about 10 years old. Like other farm kids, his father put him to work around the farm. Everybody always told Duane how smart he was. Duane had to agree with them. It was the morning of the day when he was supposed to go in front of the church session And be examined to be confirmed. His father told him to get rid of the weeds in the ditch along the field.

Duane had a hoe to dig. It occurred to Duane that he could get rid of a lot more weeds a lot faster if he just lit them on fire and burned them out. He did not burn down the house. He did not burn down the barn. He burned down the haystack. The neighbors came to help put out the fire. Duane thought he's get in big trouble. But when he came in the house, all he faced were the hopeless eyes of his parents. The hay was crucial for the animals through the winter. The animals were crucial for not losing the farm.

Duane and his family still went to his confirmation examination that night. He was confirmed. He was devastated. He questioned God's love that day. He just felt numb. No miraculous cures, nothing to ease the pain, nothing to help the family keep the farm. Then, a few days later, a complete stranger shows up. Nobody knew him. He drove a big truck. And in the back of the truck, all tied up with rope was this Haystack. Which the stranger unloaded And he simply said, "I think you need this more than I do."

Duane's niece told me that story. She said: Duane never mentioned that story to anybody until a few weeks before he knew he was going to die. Then, at that point, when he knew the end was near, He told that story to anybody who would listen. He wanted people to know this story of grace. He did not want them to miss the message.

The love of God does not keep us from disasters in our life. The love of God finds a way to help us live through them. Then the love of God works through God's people. And they come to us and help us to live. Not just to survive. They come to help us live. Through these unmerited gifts of grace. Which is what Jesus embodied and revealed. And which Jesus allows us to live into in our love of neighbor. Because after all, God is love. And that is the story we live in.

Amen.