

PENTECOST 9 (1 John 4:7-21)

God is Love

Today's passage contains some of the most moving and profound teachings on love in the New Testament. The depth and power of the three words "God is love" are often lost on us because of the abundance of contradicting concepts of love all around us. We tend to make gods out of love and equate all love with God.

First John calls its recipients to recognize the presence of God in their relationships, in terms of love for God and for one another, despite social, cultural, and mainstream challenges.

First John, however, speaks of love in a specific, distinctly Christian way. Love is not God, but God is love, meaning that believers are to understand love on God's terms and according to God's character. The author intertwines theology and ethics in such a way that he describes Christian confession as inextricable from Christian conduct. Those who know God show God through their love for others. **Divine love manifested most perfectly through the love of God in Christ** is a reality that God desires us to know, see, inhabit, and share.

God is the source and the definition of love. God is love. God loves as the sun shines: love expresses who God is. First John emphasizes that God's love is not some abstract concept – it is passion expressed in action. God made love real and present by sending Jesus to live among us and to die for us. God continues to show us love through Jesus' life-giving presence among us. If ever we should question whether God truly does love us, the gift and witness of the Holy Spirit confirmed it once more: we are God's beloved. God's love is a truth more basic and reliable than the ground we walk on and the air we breathe.

God's love does not depend on our initiative or on our worthiness. We don't have to reach out to God or even believe in God in order to be loved. We don't have to clean up our act before God can love us. We don't have to measure up to some standard in order to be lovable. No, God showers love on us whether we deserve it or not. And honestly, who could ever deserve such amazing, immeasurable love?

First John insists that the more fully and completely we know God, the more the immense reality of God's love dawns on us. When we open ourselves to the warmth and light of God's presence, we find that even our deepest, darkest secrets and the ugliest parts of ourselves are not beyond God's reach. Nothing in us is so broken or so filthy that God is unwilling or unable to touch it. God embraces us as we are, loves us as we are, and works in us to make us clean and whole and new. Upheld, surrounded, enfolded by such love, who could be afraid?

Such life-giving love is too wonderful to keep to ourselves. To know God's love is to overflow with God's love. How can we possibly love God while we hate God's beloved? Seeing ourselves as God's beloved means seeing our sisters and brothers as God's loved ones too. If we have come to know God's love, we have seen for ourselves that it is unearned, undeserved, utterly free. Although God's love is without conditions, it is not without consequences: God commands us to love one another as God has loved us.

In case we haven't understood the seriousness of this command, First John expresses it in a way that leaves no room for doubt: "just as God is, so are we in this world". In context, it's clear that First John is not saying that Christians are omnipotent or omniscient or morally pure. No, First John is saying that because God lives in us, we embody God's love for the world. We are not gods, but we are God's. God's love is incarnate in us.

The first-century Christians for whom First John was originally written were in conflict about the boundaries of their community, about theology, and

about false teaching. In this context First John focuses on love for others who belong to the community of faith. Does this mean that we are called only to love those who belong to our group and believe as we do?

The whole foundation of First John's argument suggests otherwise. If we love others as God has loved us, there can be no boundaries. God's love, made visible and present in Jesus, is the source for the love we share with others. Jesus ignored the limits that religious communities imposed. He ate and talked with people whom the religious leaders had rejected as heretics, as sinful, as filthy and despicable. He touched people who were considered untouchable and welcomed people whom everyone else had kicked out. His harshest words were reserved not for the impure, but for unloving, self-righteous people who saw some of God's children as beneath their attention and certainly as unworthy of their love. If Jesus shows us what God's love is like, then there can be no doubt how far our love for others must extend: to every single human being.

Such love can never originate with us. It is not our own, weak, limited love that we share with God's beloved. No, we are called to open ourselves to God's love so that God can love others through us. When we love one another, we *re-present* God to the world. By allowing the love that God has showered on us to overflow onto our sisters and brothers, we make divine love real and visible in the ordinary lives of ordinary people. God invites us to let Jesus live in us, so that, through us, Jesus can continue to welcome outcasts, touch untouchables and heal the broken. When God's unimaginable, limitless love comes alive in us, we become the real presence of God in the world. All we can possibly say to such love is thank you, and may it indeed be so.

To appreciate the flow of today's passage, it is helpful to follow the passage's three movements that focus on: the source of perfect love; the experience of perfect love; and the confidence of perfect love.

The author connects being “born of God” with knowing God’s character. God’s children have an intimate relationship with God and thus are deeply acquainted with God’s love. In saying that “everyone who loves is born of God and knows God”, the author implies that God’s children cannot help but love because they are so intimately in fellowship with God.

However, the author’s use of the phrase “let us love”, along with his repeated exhortations to love throughout the letter, suggests that the struggle to love is real. Rather than rebuke his audience, 1 John directs their attention to the source of love to encourage them to be conduits of God’s love to others in the community.

Again the author connects knowing God with loving others but this time in the negative: “Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. To know God is to know something of God’s character. That “God is love” means that everything God does emanates from His loving nature. Love, while not an exhaustive description of God, is a defining characteristic. People can be described as loving, but only God can be equated with love.

Divine love is not obscure or abstract, but has a special and specific meaning and expression. God defined and demonstrated his perfect love when He “sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him”. “Only Son” emphasizes Christ’s unparalleled uniqueness both in his nature, and in the life-giving impact of his atoning death for us.

Our love for God is not the condition or basis for God’s love for us (“not that we loved God”), nor do our actions make us right with God. Only “Jesus Christ the righteous” could demonstrate God’s love so palpably and perfectly on the cross.

Thus, our love for others demonstrates our fitting and grateful response to God’s immeasurable love for us: “Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another.”

The phrase “since God loved us so much” emphasises and marks a transition by explaining not why we “ought to love” but how we experience God’s perfect love. Christ’s incarnation and death have revealed that God is love and made it possible for those redeemed by God’s love in Christ to love one another. When we love in response to God’s love for us, “his love is perfected in us”.

A struggling perfectionist might find this idea that God’s love is made perfect in us somewhat perplexing. What does it mean that God’s love is perfected in us? It does not mean that Christians love perfectly, since the author tells us that “God abides in those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God”. When we confess the truth about Jesus, who is “faithful and just”, we also confess the truth about ourselves: that we need Jesus to “forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness”.

When God perfects his love in us, it means that God’s intended purpose for loving us is fulfilled when we extend the love to others. The use of the prepositional phrase “in us” is significant because it emphasizes how God reveals his love not only “for us” by sending His Son, but also “in us” by giving us His Spirit. The Spirit makes it possible for God to inhabit us, and for us to inhabit God. Also, the Spirit only confesses the truth about God, and thus empowers us to integrate our christological confession “that the Father has sent His Son as the Saviour of the world” with our loving conduct done in Christ’s name.

The author finally brings to a climax his teaching on the source, nature, and purpose of love. God is love, and everything God does is an expression of his perfect, unconditional love. We do not have to love perfectly for God’s love to be perfected in us. Interpersonal acts and expressions of love arise out of God’s perfect love revealed in Jesus. The *telos* or goal of love is that all life should flourish. God’s perfect love dwells in our midst! Christian reality is defined by this love and characterized by life-giving relationships, centred on the confession of Christ as “Saviour of the world” and expressed “in truth

and action”.

God’s perfecting love helps us love one another despite our sinful nature, so we need not be afraid to love, however imperfectly. By showing up again and again to love our brothers and sisters in Christ, we demonstrate that God is inhabiting us in such a way that His way of love becomes our *habitus*, or our internalized second nature — something we were born of God to do.

While First John’s focus is not on loving those outside the Christian community, his logic flows from the same source. How can we say we love the God who “so loved the world that He gave His only Son” if we do not love our brothers and sisters dwelling right in our midst? We cannot. But we can continue to love one another in messy ways, confident that our actions speak louder than words and find their source in the inexhaustible, perfect love of God.

The author points to the love of the church as the place where God’s own love may be seen. God’s loving intent is completely “perfected” only when that love is lived out in relation to the rest of the church. For those who look for some demonstration of the reality of God and of the gospel, the church should be able to point to its mutual love and say, “come and see”.

Much of the anger that erupts within the church under the banner of loving God and defending God’s truth often seems to grow instead from love of self and of the power that comes from winning the argument, even at the expense of the church’s unity in love. The gospel of God’s love for us in the Son sets us free from such loveless and fearful pursuits. Though the author, in talking about those who fail to love, probably has in mind those who had left the community, the text also serves as a warning to the readers against excusing loveless practice in the name of theological righteousness. This author will not allow the sacrifice of love for the sake of truth (as though they could be separated), and continually brings us back to the only place where we can learn how to love faithfully: the prior love of God for us in the sending of the Son.

The opposite of love is not hate; the opposite of love is fear. In the first instance, this epistle's claim, "Perfect love casts out fear", is about the relationship between believers and God who is creator and judge of the world. If God is exclusively understood as the God of power, or demand, or even justice, then we approach God with fear — both in this life and in the life to come.

But if understood first as the God of love, perfect love, then we approach God with confidence. God's love is perfect and our love is perfected because we trust in God's love. "We love because He first loved us."

Note the sentence carefully. It is not "we ought to love because He first loved us" as if God's love were the ground for a new imperative. It is "we can love **because** He first loved us." God's love is the ground for a new possibility.

Human analogies are never entirely adequate but they are entirely unavoidable. Watch the growth of a child and notice that the child who can give love is the child who has received love. Love grows from love while from apathy grows only coldness, fear, and retreat.

Implicit in our passage, too, is the second claim. Perfect love casts out fear in human relationships and even imperfect love diminishes fear perceptibly. A small child received a jack-in-the-box for Christmas and, to the parents' surprise, was not delighted by the puppet's popping out, but terrified. Not entirely daunted though, the child turned the handle once again until the puppet jumped out again. This time the child kissed the puppet he had feared. The child was far from fearless. But by loving, he sought to put fear in its proper place.

Remember that for 1 John, the right understanding of Christian faith and practice lies in a right understanding of John's Gospel, surely the central scripture for the community that heard this epistle read aloud. The author provides its own interpretation of the Gospel for this somewhat later

community.

The author's closing appeal to his new community focuses on the divine attribute that embodies all others, that God is Love. This is revealed in the love of the believing community for one another that manifests in full when God is present in all their relationships. Indeed, God is the foundation of all love which, in turn, actualizes a faith that conquers the world.

We must, therefore, challenge ourselves to push beyond our comfort zones to do new things. This, indeed, is how we love as Christ loved, and as God loves us. Sacrifice can be life and limb, and when it is, it should be honoured as such. But it doesn't have to be. Every time we step beyond where we'd rather be, what we'd rather do, into what might embarrass or negatively impact us in order to share God's love, we answer this call. This is our summons. God is love. Be bold. Don't fear. Share yourself. Do love. This is what will sustain us in unity, strength, and the abiding love of God.

Mother Teresa said: *"To show great love for God and our neighbour, we need not to do great things. It is **how much** love we put in the doing that makes our offering Something Beautiful for God."*

Amen.

Pentecost 9 PRAYERS - July 21, 2024

Loving God, we pray that you would fill us with the knowledge of your will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so that together we may live a life worthy of you and in every way pleasing to you; a life in which we bear fruit in every good work, and acquire strength and endurance and patience and a joyful heart — a heart that gives thanks to you in every situation.

God, creator of us all, who breathed life into each one of us, forgive us when our narrowness of understanding of you and your heart leads to our spreading hatred, abuse and negativity about people who are our brothers and sisters.

As Jesus gave thanks and taught us to follow his example, we offer our gratitude for those who continue to respond to the needs of those – often our neighbours – who lack food and basic provisions. We give thanks for the many throughout the world still helping those in need in areas of natural disasters: floods, wildfires, and volcanos, as well as East Africa where there is a great lack of food. It only takes one or two to inspire others to look outwards and join in. Lord, give us eyes to see how much we have to be thankful for.

We give thanks for those who, despite terrible strain and difficulties, continue welcoming the homeless, stateless and refugees. Strengthen those fleeing from danger and violence or from economic deprivation and the lack of basic clean water and sanitation. We pray for the children of our world who hunger and thirst, and those who have no home or place to call their own, that they may have bread and drink for each day and a bed for each night. Help us to be compassionate and caring for the vulnerable and weak. Grow us to be passionate about tackling the issues which force so many to flee their homes.

We pray for our nation and for all who are in authority over us, and for all nations of our world, that there may be peace with justice within them and between them, especially Russia and Ukraine, Israel and Palestine. We pray for Haiti and the people fleeing the violence.

We pray for those who are alone and without hope, homeless and abandoned, and those who long to feel needed and loved, those who are searching for meaning and purpose.

We pray for all who don't have enough water to drink, or feed their animals, whose fields are parched, whose crops have withered; those who have to walk long distances to find enough water to survive, or who have to be content with water that is unclean. We pray for those whose homes and villages are torn apart because of drought or famine.

We pray for those who long for an equal sharing of resources among peoples and nations; those who put their lives at risk to protect streams and rivers and oceans; those who are working to find clean water and make it available to those who need it.

Holy Spirit, we dare ask you to help us love more fervently, to love when love is hard to do, and to remember that, when we love, it is only possible because you first loved us.

What a great world it would be if, like Jesus, we cared for the sick and the handicapped, the diseased and the mentally ill, those fighting addictions, those undergoing treatments or awaiting surgery. Today we uplift Pastor Kristin Steele, and Bishop Kathy.

We pray for our church and its leaders: Bishop Kathy and Bishop Susan, Anna, Anglican Primate Linda Nicolls, all pastors, priests, deacons, lay leaders, musicians, and volunteers. We pray for Faith Lutheran in Kelowna - Rev. Brian Krushel, Gloria Dei Lutheran in North Vancouver - Rev. Vida Jaugelis, the Evangelical Luther Church of Jordan and the Holy Land, the congregation of San Juan Camino d'Esperanze and Pastor Ana Maria Jara.

Lord, help us to remember that we, small as we are as individuals, are made to live in community with each other and you, and to be channels of your love, grace and power. Help us to not be afraid of the endless possibilities that living our lives open to your grace entails, and instead of wanting to fix everything according to our own understanding, help us to be who You want us and have created us to be, thereby enabling the transforming power of your Spirit to flow through us, into your world. Lord, let there be light, love and peace rather than darkness, hatred and violence. In your name we ask it.

Lord Jesus Christ, help us love one another, for when we do so, we are loving you. Set our minds on heavenly things. Fill us with your joy. **Amen.**

In the name of Jesus Christ, we pray to you as one family...

Our Father ...