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Sermon Series: *The Greatest of These*, No. 2

God Is Love

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1 John 4:7-21 [NIV]

Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. ⁸Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. ⁹This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. ¹⁰This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. ¹¹Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. ¹²No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.

¹³This is how we know that we live in him and he in us: He has given us of his Spirit. ¹⁴And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world. ¹⁵If anyone acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God, God lives in them and they in God. ¹⁶And so we know and rely on the love God has for us.

God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in them. ¹⁷This is how love is made complete among us so that we will have confidence on the day of judgment: In this world we are like Jesus. ¹⁸There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love.

¹⁹We love because he first loved us. ²⁰Whoever claims to love God yet hates a brother or sister is a liar. For whoever does not love their brother and sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen.

²¹And he has given us this command: Anyone who loves God must also love their brother and sister.

We're in the book of 1 John this morning. 1 John, Chapter 4.

This being February, what with Valentine's Day and all, I thought we'd invest a few weeks here on l...o...v...e!

That's my imitation of Barry White – which will only mean something to maybe 30% of you – you who know what “easy listening” music is. But that's how he'd say it – and sing it: l...o...v...e!

Try it...say it with me...as deep as you can go...and draw it out: l...o...v...e!

That's what most of Barry White's songs were about.

Actually, that's what *most* songs are about – no matter the writer, no matter the genre, no matter the style – either old or new. Love is the prime motivator for song writing. Love of another person, love of nature, love of God, love of country, love of dog or pick-up truck or whatever.

There were a couple of guys – a duo – from the 70's, England Dan and John Ford Coley. In 1979 they released an album called, *Dr. Heckle and Mr. Jive*, which has nothing to do with the message – I just think that album title is pretty cool: *Dr. Heckle and Mr. Jive*.

Anyway, there was a song on that album called, “Love is the Answer,” which, if you look at the lyrics, really could be interpreted to be Christian, although I don't think that was on Todd Rundgren's mind when he wrote it.

Yet it's true just the same. Love is not just the motive for song. Love really is the answer to the greatest questions of the world. At least, that's what the Apostle John believed when he wrote these words – I'll call it a “song” – that we have here.

These words of John's are some of the most profound in the Bible. There's a year's worth of sermons and a lifetime

of study right here in this Chapter 4, but I want to focus in today on just this one statement that he makes – there in verse 8 – that is the clearest, briefest, most significant and comprehensive description possible of the essence – the nature – of God.

John says, simply: “God is love.”

God is love.

What does that mean – that God is love?

We said last Sunday – here's one thing it does *not* mean. It does *not* mean that God is merely *loving*. That would be a great diminishing of John's words here, as if to say love is just one of God's many attributes or character marks.

No – this is not just that.

Actually, there are three things Scripture tells us – really, John alone tells us – that God simply *is*.

John tells us that God is *light* earlier in this letter – in 1 John 1:5.

He says that God is *Spirit* in his gospel, John 4: 24.

And here, John says that God is *love*, with love being the over-riding, overwhelming definition of His *character*.

God is not merely loving. God *is* love.

And you know, just as England Dan and John Ford Coley sang, love really is the answer to the biggest questions of life.

Like, why do we exist? Why did God create? Well, He created in love and out of love.

Why did God make us with free wills? Because God loves, and He wants to be loved in return – and no one can truly love apart from having the freedom to do so. Forced or manipulated love is not real love.

Why does God provide for us? Because of love – He wants us to flourish.

Why did God send Jesus to redeem us? Because we'd gotten ourselves into a sinful mess from which we could not save ourselves – and He loves us too much to leave us there.

Why does God provide eternal life? Because He loves us and does not want us to suffer apart from Him forever.

God is love – and so love really is the answer to life's greatest questions because God is the beginning and end of our existence.

Now, just quickly, and sort of parenthetically here, let me say something else about these three words, “God is love.” They are not commutative. They're not commutative.

You know what that means?

It's a math term, and it means that you can't re-arrange their order – you can't move them around.

I mention this because our culture wants them to be commutative. The world around us has even convinced some people in the church that they should be commutative. But they're not.

You see, the world does not want to say, “God is love.”

The world wants to say, “love is god;” to define love however it pleases, and then say, “You see – *that’s* God.” “Love, as I’ve defined it here – that’s god.”

And what happens when you do that is that if you don’t happen to subscribe to this person’s definition of love – or that person’s definition of love – if you disagree with them, then your disagreement become sacrilege – blasphemy – because love, however they define it, has become god to them.

But you see – you can’t move things around like that in language.

John does not say “love is god.” John says, “God is love.”

And, of course John is not talking about some fuzzy-headed, endlessly adaptable, ever-changing feeling – an opinion-driven conception of God.

No – the God John is referring to is the Judeo-Christian God – the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob – the Great I Am, who is revealed in the Old Testament and who Jesus reveals to us perfectly. John’s God is the God of the Bible – with all of His moral and ethical imperatives intact, you see? And that is the God, John says, who is love.

That is the God who defines love.

Love does not define God.

God defines love – that is the non-commutative order of the phrase. And what that means is that wherever our conceptions of love do not line up with the character and word of God as revealed in His written and Living word, then it’s not God who has to change, you see? It’s our definition of love – it’s our idea and conception of love that has to adapt.

Love is only as changeable as the revealed character of God allows it to be, which is something the people of God really need to understand and take seriously – in our day especially.

God is love.

Now, in this context of John’s here – to make sense of what he’s saying – we need to grasp two other things.

First, we need to understand his conception of love – when John is saying love, here, what does He mean?

And then second, what is the context of his writing – why is he writing all this in the first place?

First, let’s talk John’s conception of love – and let me say, this is a drastic simplification, OK? Rooms of books have been written on this. But here’s the gist:

You’ve probably heard that in Koine Greek – the language of the time of the New Testament – there were at least four different words – Greek words – that we translate into the one English word, “love.” English limits us in this case.

First, there was *philia*, which is an emotion, a feeling of affection – deep affection – felt between good friends. You’ve heard it called “brotherly love.” *Philia* appears in some form several times in the New Testament.

Second there is *eros*, which is also a feeling – but a rather selfish, self-gratifying one. This is a desire for personal appropriation – a getting what we want – like in a sexual attraction. This word – it’s derivative, really – appears in

Greek translations of the *Song of Solomon*, in the context of husband and wife. But it never shows up in the New Testament.

Third there is the word *storge*, which is that instinctive, natural love that exists between family members, parent and child, sibling and sibling – that family connection. It never appears in its positive form in the New Testament, but it does appear a couple times in its negative form, where it’s typically translated “heartless.”

And I might mention that, where it appears in the New Testament in the negative, its message seems to be that when people lose this type of natural love for family, that’s a breakdown of the natural order, and actually, a sign of the end.

And then fourth, there is the word *agape*.

This is, by far, the most common word for love used in the New Testament – in fact, in just the 15 verses of the text that was read for us today, some form of *agape* appears 27 times.

The big difference in *agape* love is that it is not a love that’s based on a feeling or emotion. *Agape* is a love that’s rooted in the will. It’s unconditional. It doesn’t depend on feeling. It doesn’t depend on reciprocity.

Anders Nygren says, “*Agape* is unmotivated in the sense that it is not contingent on any value or worth in the object of love. It is spontaneous. It does not determine beforehand whether love will be effective or appropriate; rather, it’s automatic, self-sacrificial, unconditional, without concern for deservedness.”

In His life and in His death, this is the kind of love that Jesus demonstrated both toward God His Father and toward all humanity. Jesus’ motivation for all He did was selfless, *agape* love – to please God His Father for the sake of love for Him, and to save us, for the sake of love of us, you see?

This is the sort of love that John is talking about, and this is the love John’s talking about Christ-followers – his readers – *themselves possessing and practicing*.

When John says there in verse 7, “*Dear friends, let us love one another,*” this is the sort of *love* that he’s talking about.

Which, then, moves us to the context of this letter. Why was John writing in the first place?

He tells us that right there – first thing in verse 7. “*Let us love one another.*”

He’s not calling us here to love God.

Neither is he calling us here to love the people of the world.

John’s call is for followers of Jesus to love other Jesus-followers.

Of course, this that John was saying here was nothing new. The fact is, he’s repeating exactly what he heard Jesus say back in John 13, where Jesus said to his disciples, “*A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another.*” [John 13:34]

Why was this important to Jesus? Why was it important to John? “*Because,*” Jesus continued back in

John 13, *“by this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.”*

In Jesus’ understanding, the presence and practice of this agape love would be the sign – the badge of His true followers. Agape love is the indication that we share in God’s nature – in Jesus’ nature. That we live in Him and that He lives in us.

Agape love is the power that allows the church, not just to tolerate one another, but to thrive and embrace – to really be one, even in difference and with our individualities.

Agape love is the mark of the presence of God upon His people – love that is others-centered, unconditional and not based on momentary feelings or emotions or reciprocity.

That’s the love of God.

That’s the love of Jesus.

And that’s the love, John says, that’s designed to characterize all who are Jesus’ true followers – all who are born of God – because when we are born of God, we take on God’s nature – His nature of agape love.

You say, “Well, that’s a nice thought, but is it really possible?”

To that I would say, “I don’t think Jesus commands things of His people that are impossible. I don’t think God’s word calls people to places that are impossible for them to go.”

So how do we get there?

Well, do you remember how, after His resurrection – there on the lakeshore – Jesus asked Peter if he loved Him – three times Jesus asked, “Peter, do you love me?” Jesus used the word agape there, by the way.

And three times, Peter replied that he did love Him, but what we don’t immediately realize is that Peter used in his response the word *philia* – brotherly love – not agape – unconditional love.

Peter, at that point, could not grasp agape.

And yet, not long after that, we find Peter talking and writing about agape love here and there and everywhere.

In fact, Peter was so full of God’s love that he spoke from the heart and 3,000 people came to Jesus. Peter was imprisoned for Jesus. Peter suffered for Jesus. Peter died, tradition says, by being crucified upside down, for the love of Jesus.

So, what happened to Peter?

One thing: Pentecost. Pentecost happened to Peter.

The coming of the Holy Spirit to the world – to the Church – to Peter personally. It was the presence of the Spirit of God in Peter’s life – that’s what changed Peter. God’s Spirit emboldened Peter and gave him the power and capacity for God’s love.

The way to *agape* is through God’s presence – and in this age, we know God’s presence by His Holy Spirit.

N.T. Wright talks about a conversation he had once with a friend who had been deeply hurt by some church. The fellow said, “You know, churches ought to have warning signs out front that say, ‘Danger: nasty, gossipy, judgmental, unkind people ahead.’”

Have you been in churches – or some Christian group – like that?

Most of us have.

The apostle’s writings, including John’s right here, let us know that groups like that have existed ever since the first century.

But that’s not how God designed the Christian and the body of Christ to be.

You see, this whole thing – this movement – this force that God launched in our world through *Jesus*, He wants to *complete* it in *us* – in all who follow Jesus.

Just as you and I have seen the very character and nature of God in Jesus Christ, God wants the unsaved world to see that same character and nature of God in *us* – specifically, in our *agape* – in the way we love one another unconditionally.

It’s possible – it’s all possible. But not in ourselves – not in our own strength.

It happens as our nature is transformed by God’s Spirit into the very nature of God.

You know, Jesus made a difference every place He went. Something powerful happened in every room He entered.

That’s what God’s love does, especially in a harsh and sinful world like ours. That sort of love either makes those around you embrace you – or kill you.

And that sort of provocation – that sort of influence – that’s what God has in mind for His people.

And it all starts by our loving each other.

John says a lot more about all this, and maybe we’ll explore more of it in the next couple weeks, but here’s the thing for today:

God is love.

If we’re going to participate in God – in His salvation – then according to John, and to Jesus for that matter, we must participate in God’s love.

Agape love is not some optional add-on to following Jesus. It’s really the essential core of the whole thing.

So much so that John says there in verse 20, *“Look, if we say we love God, but we don’t love our brothers and sisters in faith, then we’re telling lies.”*

And these are the very lies that stunt the church and keep God’s Kingdom from coming in its fullness in our world.

If you’re thinking this morning, “I don’t have that sort of love in me – but I want to have it. I want more – I need more of that sort of love in me. That’s what I want to be. That’s how I want to love people: selflessly and freely – without depending on them loving me back. I want *agape* love to flow out of me, so others see Jesus in me.”

If you’re thinking that, you need to know, that’s what God wants for you too – that’s what God wants for His Church.

And if your heart is open to it, God, by His Spirit, will pour that love – His love – into you. God is love, so He will give you Himself. He will give you His nature – His essence – which is *agape* love.

Would you want that today?

Would you be open to Him giving you more of Himself—His nature—which is *agape* love?

Come to Him and ask—just ask. Tell Him, “God, if there is more of You to receive—if there is more of Your nature than that which is in me right now—I want it. I need it. Fill me with yourself, that I might be fully yours—so I might love as you love.”

You can pray that prayer in your seats. You can pray that prayer at this altar. The important thing is that you

open yourself to God that He might be able to say all He wants to say—and give all He has to give to us.

Benediction: God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in them. This is how love is made complete among us. Go, living in love.

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