

Because God Is Love

SERMON BACKGROUND STUDY

1st Sunday after the Epiphany

January 11, 2009

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1 John 4:16-21 (NRSV)

^{16b}God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. ¹⁷Love 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. ¹⁸There 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. ¹⁹We love because he first loved us. ²⁰Those who say, “I love God,” and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. ²¹The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.

Ephesians 2:1-10 (NRSV)

You were dead through the trespasses and sins ²in which you once lived, following the course of this world, following the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient. ³All of us once lived among them in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of flesh and senses, and we were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else. ⁴But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us ⁵even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved— ⁶and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, ⁷so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. ⁸For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God— ⁹not the result of works, so that no one may boast. ¹⁰For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.

*Where would we begin to describe God? Perhaps with John's simple statement:
God is love.*

This week, we begin a new series, “Why We Are United Methodists.” It is tempting to plunge right into the history, beliefs, and practices of the United Methodist Church, but that wouldn’t really answer the “why” question. Each of us has a story to tell about how we made our way to the United Methodist Church and to St. Andrew. Some of us have been Methodists our entire lives, others of us are new to the United Methodist denomination in the family of believers.

1 John

1 John was one of the last New Testament books to be written, perhaps very close to the end of the first century. Though 1 John is usually referred to as a letter, it is more like a pastoral treatise written to confront false teachers and prophets in the Christian community. Compared to the logic and argument that characterizes much of Paul’s letters, this essay is much more like a musical composition. It is tightly and simply written. C. Clifton Black writes, “[1 John] doesn’t just convey information; it does something to the listener. . . we do not interpret 1 John. It interprets us.”

Augustine noted that 1 John points us toward little else than love. It is love that expresses the nature of God, who revealed his love for us by the gift of his Son, for “We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us – and we ought to lay down our lives for one another” (1 John 3:16). In 4:7-21, John gives us a virtual theology of love. Through it all, love is never simply good feelings toward another. Love is action. We cannot claim to love God and turn our back on others. It is through loving others that we come to know and love God.

I married into the UMC many decades ago. Though Episcopalian growing up, I never gave the change much thought. Methodism seemed comfortable enough and I soon found myself teaching Sunday School and was even invited to preach a few times, as Methodism has a long tradition of lay preachers.

But still, I couldn't have said that Methodism or the UMC was really a heart-felt, thought-out choice from among all the Christian denominations. There is much variety of tradition, expression, theology, and practice in the body of Christ, from the Spirit-filled experiences of the Pentecostals to the deep and beautiful traditions of the Orthodox. So far as I was concerned, the UMC and its Wesleyan¹ heritage was a perfectly fine place for me to live out my faith, but that was about as far as it went.

Abide?

In today's passage from 1 John, we find the word "abide" several times. A well-known hymn (#700 in our hymnal) begins:

"Abide with me;
fast falls the eventide;
the darkness deepens;
Lord, with me abide.
When other helpers fail
and comforts flee,
Help of the helpless,
O abide with me.

Abide is one of those words that we find in our Bibles, but rarely use ourselves. It translates the Greek word, *meno*, which is variously translated as "remain," "stay," "endure," "abide," and "continue."

John uses *meno* to convey the permanence of God's relationship with his people and with each of us as individuals. God will always be God-with-us. The Holy Spirit is God's empowering presence with us and in us. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, God abides . . . stays . . . endures . . . remains with us and we in him. We can find comfort and strength in the reassurance of God's presence in us and with us.

But since coming to St. Andrew, I have been blessed to teach and preach regularly. And I've found that my appreciation of and commitment to United Methodist theology, traditions, and practices have grown ever deeper. Indeed, I can now say that I am not only a Christian on purpose, but I am also a United Methodist Christian by meaningful and informed choice. Why? Because God is love.

Describing God

Suppose someone came up to you and asked you to tell them about God, to describe God to them. Where would you begin? With an adjective? A story perhaps? What words would sum up the essential characteristics of God?

Pause before you answer, for you'll find yourself on one path or another. For example, you might begin with the simple and very true statement, "God is great." You would probably soon find yourself talking about God's creation of the cosmos and his control of it. But if Jesus is the *full* revelation of God, then how does Jesus' incarnation reveal to us God's greatness? You probably don't need the baby Jesus to know that God is great. After all, God's greatness is a key theme shared by all the monotheistic religions.

Nonetheless, John, in his letter, takes us closer to God's essence with the simple statement,

"God is love." This is a statement about God that I don't think you could ever really know without the incarnation, from the crib to the cross.

Jesus, fully human and fully divine, reveals to us that God is inherently relational, one God existing as three persons, each of whom is fully and completely God though none are all of God. The three, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, are not simply three parts of a whole. Each *is* the whole though not all of it. The truth is that we lack the words to describe what our minds cannot fully comprehend.

¹John Wesley was the founder of "Methodism" though he never left the Church of England. His 18th century movement strove to revive the Church of England's commitment to personal holiness and social justice. We will talk much more about John Wesley and his brother, Charles, throughout this series.

Nonetheless, we proclaim that there is one God consisting of three persons who have always been, are now, and always shall be a loving community of three, the trinity. This truth about God makes John's statement, "God is love," not mere sentiment, but a concrete statement of God's being, a God consisting of love – both lover and beloved in one God. Indeed, it is from God's love that we learn the true meaning of love. As John writes: "We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us – and we ought to lay down our lives for one another" (1 John 3:16).

Did Paul write Ephesians?

Perhaps. Perhaps not. It may surprise you to learn that this question even comes up. After all, the first words of Ephesians clearly attribute the letter to Paul (v. 1). But there are good reasons to believe that this letter was penned by one of Paul's followers, rather than Paul himself. For example, in several places the writer seems to have no first-hand knowledge of the church in Ephesus even though Paul spent three years there (see 1:15; 3:2; 4:21). There are no greetings to people Paul would surely have known. In addition, the style and grammar of the letter are dramatically different from letters we know Paul personally wrote, such as Romans and Galatians.

So . . . if Paul didn't write the letter, would it be a lie to claim that he did?

No! In the Greco-Roman first-century world, if a person wrote to convey the thoughts or teachings of another, then the writing was to be attributed to the teacher. Doing otherwise would have been considered dishonest. It is a little like this. If I had spent a couple of weeks with Robert Hasley in the first-century and then written you a letter to pass on what I had learned from him, you would have expected the letter to bear Robert's name, not mine. The letter would have contained his teachings, not mine. This isn't how we do things in our world, (we use footnotes and citations instead) but it does make some sense. The early church accepted the Letter to the Ephesians as the authentic and inspired teachings of Paul the Apostle.

So, did Paul write Ephesians. You'll find knowledge Bible-believing Christians on both sides of that question. But we all understand that for nearly 2,000 years, the Christian community has accepted Ephesians as inspired Scripture, every bit as much as the four gospels or Paul's letter to the Romans.

This is where John Wesley's personal theology and, hence, United Methodist beliefs begin: "God is love." In the lyrics of Charles Wesley, John's brother: "Love divine all loves excelling, joy of heaven, to earth come down."

The Wesley brothers understood that it is love and grace that define God. Grace is simply love in action. The cross, the sacrifice and faithfulness it embodied, takes us to the heart, the essence, of God. As Paul writes in his letter to the Ephesians: "God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places . . . For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God." (from 2:4-8).

Why?

The title of this series is based on a book, *Why I Am a United Methodist*, written by UMC Bishop William Willimon when he was the chaplain at Duke Seminary. He wrote:

"Both Charles and John felt that experience of the grace of God was at the center of Christian existence. No one preached grace better than John; no one sang about grace better than Charles. . . Admittedly, our Wesleyan emphasis on love and grace can be perverted into a kind of mushy, all-affirming inclusiveness, open to everything and rejecting nothing. This is certainly not true of Wesley and is not true of us United Methodists at our best."

Love? -- Eros, Phileo, and Agape

If we really want to grasp the biblical perspective of love, we need to begin with the Greek word choices made by the NT writers. They had three words from which to choose.

Eros is a Greek word that has been taken directly into English. For the ancient Greeks, *eros* was the passionate love that desired the other for oneself. Often equated with sexual lust and fulfillment, the basic idea is that of erotic intoxication or ecstasy. *Eros* is never used by the NT writers. Paul could have used this word in his discussions of love and marriage, but he did not. This choice begins to point us in the biblical direction. Love is never about the fulfillment of our own desires, regardless of how powerful or wonderful the experience might be.

Phileo (verb) is a Greek word that is a little more familiar than you might think. After all, Philadelphia is the city of brotherly love. *Phileo* carries the sense of relatedness, specifically, to treat someone as if they were one of your own people. For example, we sometimes treat someone as if they were a member of our family -- that would be *philia* (the noun form). The NT writers use *phileo* a few times, but very infrequently. There is little theological significance to its occasional use (only about twenty times). *Phileo* is often used synonymously with *agape*, the NT word for love.

Agape is used about 250 times by the NT writers. Just as significant, when Greek-speaking Jews translated the Hebrew OT into Greek, they almost exclusively used *agape*. Why did they choose this word?

Agape was used very little by Greek writers in the ancient world. It was a weak word, lacking the power of *eros* and the warmth of *phileo*. Perhaps the best way to describe *agape* was "colorless." It just didn't have a lot of meaning – which made it perfect for the Biblical authors! No Greek word really meant what they wanted to say.

Because *agape* was a colorless word, its meaning to the original readers came solely from its context. The biblical translators and authors knew that the scriptural meaning of love, God's meaning, was far different from what the world meant by love. If they used *eros* or *phileo*, readers would bring to Scripture many misconceptions. But by using *agape*, this colorless word, Paul, Matthew, John, and the rest could shape the word's meaning to God's meaning for it, a meaning which is grounded in sacrificing for others.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

In the key scripture passage for this week, John writes that "God is love." Our belief in the trinity – one God who has always existed in three persons – reveals that God is inherently relational, that God is inherently loving, that God is inherently a loving community of three persons. We, in turn, are created in God's image. What might this say about the nature of the loving relationships we have with others? To put it another way, when we embrace the image of God within ourselves, how does this affect the way we relate to others?

When have you most experienced God's love for you? When does it seem most real to you? At what times in your life have you most exemplified God's love for you in your love for others?

In the New Testament, love is not a feeling or even an idea. It is the concrete expression of Jesus' self-sacrificial death on the cross. "We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us – and we ought to lay down our lives for others." (1 John 3:16) We look to Jesus' life to see what love really is. True love for God and neighbor is an expression of our repentance, transformation, discipline, and sacrifice. How can Jesus' example of sacrificial love transform our own notions of what it means to love others? How is your love for others seen in your own concrete actions? How is your love for God seen in your actions? Do we ask enough of ourselves or is our love limited to that for which we can find some extra time and effort in our busy lives?

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

Monday, 1 John 1:1-2:6 Introit for eternal life	Tuesday, 1 John 2:2-14 What I [John] am writing
Wednesday, 1 John 2:15- 3:10 Children, this is the last hour	Thursday, 1 John 3:11-5:12 The message you have heard from the beginning
Friday, 1 John 5:13-21 Refrain: That you may know you have eternal life	Weekly Prayer Concerns

Bible Academy begins this week

www.thebibleacademy.com

We've got another great line-up of classes, including *Talking Theology at The Shack*, *Major Lessons from Minor Prophets*, *Living Faith*, *Our Beginnings: The Book of Genesis*, *Managing Our Finance's God's Way*, *The God who Saves: Exodus and New Exodus*, and *The Fruit of the Spirit*.

As always, please register early!!

The God of Possibilities

Why do we pray? Do we actually think we can influence God? Do our prayers actually matter in how things work out? We'll tackle these questions and more as we consider how it is that God relates to each of us and to his creation.

This new series begins today in Scott Engle's Sunday class.

We meet in Festival Hall. Please join us!

All the Sermon Background Studies (now more than 350) can be found at www.thebibleacademy.com.

They are posted as easily downloadable pdf files. Your browser can search the listing for studies on specific books of the Bible or Scripture passages. They are suitable for individual study and for biblically-oriented small group discussions.

You will also be able to join the Yahoo group ([sa_studies](#)) so you can get the background study e-mailed to you each week.

Sermon Notes
