

Love Casts Out Fear

Fourth Sunday in Lent

March 30, 2003

Sermon Background Study

Scripture Passage – 1 John 4:13-21 (NRSV)

¹³By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit. ¹⁴And we have seen and do testify that the Father has sent his Son as the Savior of the world. ¹⁵God abides in those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God, and they abide in God. ¹⁶So we have known and believe the love that God has for us.

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.

As I write this, bombs are falling on Baghdad and U.S. troops are moving across Iraq. It is hard to calm the heart and to focus the mind. Yet in these verses from 1 John, we are urged to find hope and peace in God's love for us and our own love for others, confident in God's gift of his Spirit to each of us. Scott

“ . . . he has given us of His Spirit”

The Holy Spirit is the empowering presence of God in our lives. This is not only true of us as the community of faith, but it is also true for each individual believer. All Christians have been “born from above” (John 3). All Christians are indwelt by God’s Spirit. In the opening verse of today’s passage, John reminds us that we know that we abide¹ in God and that God abides in us precisely because we’ve been given the gift of the Spirit of God.

Unfortunately, for many Christians the Holy Spirit is little more than some sort of gray blur, rather than the very person of God present in our lives. On the night before his crucifixion, Jesus promised his disciples that God would send a comforter, a helper, who indeed did come in great power to the disciples on Pentecost. The Holy Spirit is this comforter, who reassures us and brings us peace. As we seek peace in difficult times, we can draw strength from the knowledge that we are not alone – in the most real sense. The Holy Spirit, the third person in the Trinity, dwells in us all, reassuring us of God’s love.

“God is Love”

Loving isn’t something God just does, nor is it one aspect of God’s character among many. God is love (v. 16b). I didn’t always

¹ The text box on page 2 takes a closer look at what we mean by “abide.”

1 John

1 John was one of the last NT 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 4:7-12, 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.

appreciate how profound this simple statement is. God's very being is a loving community of three persons: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit – the same Holy Spirit who dwells in each of us. God “can't not” love; God is love. Those “who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them” (v.16). Earlier in the letter, John wrote “Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins” (4:8-10). John wants us to understand that God's love is not simply sentimentality or something that makes us feel good. God's love is expressed in God's actions and it is through God's actions that we learn what true love really is.

“ . . . love casts out fear”

The perfection of love is confidence. Though in this letter John writes specifically about Christian confidence related to the time of judgment, Glenn Barker writes, “John probably believed that ‘confidence’ was the mark of a believer in every relationship to God (see 3:21 & 5:14). . . . To live in love is to live in God; and this results in complete confidence.”² Sometimes it can be hard to know what to make of such statements. John is not merely exhorting Christians to be strong and confident; he is reminding them that Christians must always look forward. We know that the story ends well – for us and for all of creation. John urges his readers to be confident of Christ's coming (2:28-33) and to remember the promise of eternal life with God (2:25). The early Christian communities lived with a keen sense of expectation. They eagerly awaited the final consummation of God's kingdom.

I suspect that many of us do not live in such hopeful expectation. Indeed, books like the *Left Behind* series fill many Christians with a fear of the “end-times,” rather than confidence and joy at the thought of Jesus' return. It boils down to this. God loves us, as demonstrated by his sending of his Son, and nothing can separate us from this love . . .

Abide?

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.

nothing! (see Romans 8:38-39) In turn, “we love because he first loved us” (4:19). In this loving relationship, we can find peace and confidence and strength and assurance because God will never abandon us, regardless of what life throws at us.

“ . . . those who love God must love their brothers and sisters”

In this letter, John writes to Christians living in community. John commands the believers to love one another and gives it a practical spin. John ties obedience to Jesus to love: “whoever obeys his word, truly in this person the love of God has reached perfection” (2:5). He expresses love as care for the needy: “How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses to help?” (3:17). The closing verses of today's passage gets to the heart of the matter. “Those who say, ‘I love God,’ and hate their brothers and sisters are liars . . . those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.”

Sometimes people will read these verses about loving our brothers and sisters and see in them a retreat from the universal call to love neighbor, but this would be a mistake. Though John is focused on loving relationships within the community of God's people, this in no way diminishes Jesus' demand that we love those who are most difficult for us to love. This is the whole point of the Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-27). Indeed, we are to love even our enemies (Matthew: 5:43-48). This seems quite impossible at times, but all things are possible with God – because we abide in God and he in us!

² from Barker's commentary on 1 John in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Zondervan, 1981.

Daily Bible Readings³

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.

Day 1 1 John 1:1-2:6 Introit for eternal life	Day 2 1 John 2:2-14 What I [John] am writing
Day 3 1 John 2:15- 3:10 Children, this is the last hour	Day 4 1 John 3:11-5:12 The message you have heard from the beginning
Day 5 1 John 5:13-21 Refrain: That you may know you have eternal life	Weekly Prayer Concerns

³ This outline is taken from Clifton Black's commentary in the *New Interpreter's Bible*, Abingdon Press, 1998.

Sermon Notes

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. Our society is in love with “love.” It is a word we throw around easily. Rather than sentimentality or “good” feelings toward others, John teaches that love is what God has given to the church. This love is true and is grounded in action. In love, we obey Jesus. In love, we care for others. Further, we love as a community. Discuss what John means by love. Contrast it to the meaning of love in the pop culture. What makes a church a loving community? Brainstorm together for qualities and actions which are characteristic of a loving Christian community. In what ways is St. Andrew a loving church? What might your group members do to show love within our fellowship?

2. It is one thing to say we shouldn’t hate. It is another to actually live it. Studs Terkel interviewed Mamie Mobley, a black woman whose son was murdered by two white racists in 1955. Here is what she had to say:

“It certainly would be unnatural not to [hate them], yet I’d have to say I’m unnatural. . . . The Lord gave me shield, I don’t know how to describe it myself. . . . I did not wish them dead. I did not wish them in jail. If I had to, I could take in their four little children – they each had two – and I could raise them as if they were my own and I could have loved them. . . . I believe the Lord meant what he said, and try to live according to the way I’ve been taught.”⁴

Can you even envision having such an attitude? What does this say about the reality of God’s presence and love? What do you think she means when she refers to herself as “unnatural.” What role do you think her church might have played in helping her find such “unnaturalness?”

⁴ Taken from Clifton Black’s commentary on John’s letters in *The New Interpreter’s Bible*.