

Sermon, February 13, 2022

1 John 4:7-21  
"To Abide in Love"

In this letter written by the author of the Gospel of John, we are brought to the very heart of Christian faith and theology. He begins the passage saying, "Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God." What is truly significant about this is that it tells us that Christian faith, i.e., Christian life, is not simply a matter of holding certain beliefs - it's about relationships. It's about our relationship with God, with one another, and beyond. John continues by saying that "Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love."

When John says that God is love, he is not simply talking about the nature of God. He is pointing to the way that God reveals himself to us. And how does God reveal that? John's answer is found in his very well-known statement in the third chapter of his Gospel - "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life." In other words, God's primary revelation of his love is that he sent us his Son for our sake. In Jesus we see the love of God. And when John says "everyone who believes in him" I think he means more than just accepting doctrinal claims about him but believing in the ways that Jesus lived his life - a life filled with compassion, mercy, and the willingness to forgive.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote, "God is love" First of all, for the sake of clarity, the sentence is to be read with the emphasis on the word God, whereas we have fallen into the habit of emphasizing the word love. **God** is love; that is to say not a human attitude, or a conviction or a deed, but God himself is love. Only him who knows God knows what love is; it is not the other way around; it is not that we first of all by nature know what love is and therefore know what God is. No one knows God unless God reveals himself to him. And so, no one knows what love is except in the self-revelation of God. Love, then is the revelation of God. And the revelation of God is Jesus Christ."

That's a bit of a mouthful, but it shows that our human understanding of love is different from what is revealed in Jesus Christ. It's important that we understand what is meant by love in this context. It's not to be understood in a sentimental way or associated with certain feelings. It's about how we relate to one another, and how we relate to God. In that sense we can say that we can love someone, even if we do not like that certain someone. An example of that is found in Jesus' teaching that we should love our enemies. It's not about liking our enemies; it's about not retaliating in hateful ways. That is what was at the core of Martin Luther King's non-violent activism - that you do not respond to the hateful aggression by one's enemies by also acting in a hateful manner. With love you break the cycle of hate. A cycle devoid of love is never ending! In other words, Godly love transcends human understanding of love.

But as John insists, because we are loved by God, and know God's love as it is revealed in Jesus Christ, then we must extend that love to others. As he says, "Those who say, 'I love God', and hate their brothers and 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".

I think what John means when he speaks of the God we have not seen, he's talking about having seen God with our hearts rather than our eyes.

Notice that John begins this passage with the word, "beloved", and later refers to brothers and sisters. This tells us that his letter was addressed to a specific congregation, and believe me, I have known congregations where that message was much needed. And the obvious divisions within the church as a whole speaks volumes as to the primary reasons for those divisions. But it is also essential that the love that we find in Jesus Christ extend far beyond the boundaries of the church. As John 3:16 says' "For God so loved the world". So, if God so loves the world, then we too must extend Godly love to the world. That is how we are called to be servants to the world, but it also is an important aspect of evangelization. As the song says, "They will know we are Christians by our love." If the church acts in mean, hurtful, and unloving ways, our bearing witness to the love of God falls flat.

And, so, the primary mission of the church is to reveal God's love in the name of Jesus Christ, by caring for the poor, the marginalized, the sick and dying- to be advocates for peace and justice - and for care for the planet itself. To say that God so loves the world means more than us human beings, but the whole of creation as well. Amen.

**Let us pray:** God of grace and glory, we thank you for this day, and all with which it will be filled. We know you to be the author of love, and that your love extends throughout creation. We thank you that you have revealed yourself through that love and in the person of Jesus Christ. Through his example let us also bear witness to your love in all that we say and do. Help us to be the best servants that we can be caring for those in need and walking in the ways of peace and justice. We ask for your blessing, upon the Church throughout the world that it may demonstrate love through greater unity. We also ask your blessing upon our congregation and invite your Holy Spirit to be present at our annual meeting. Knowing that you are a God of healing we ask for your particular presence with those are sick, injured, or dying. Amen.