

Sermon April 28, 2024
1 John 4:7-21

“That Which Dwells Within Us”

Throughout the history of religion and ancient mythologies there have been beliefs in many different kinds of gods...gods of war, gods of peace, gods of the seas, and gods of the land. In Greek mythology you have Aphrodite, the goddess of love. But in today's reading our God is not a god of love, but a God who is love. Love is the very essence of who and what God is, but what does it mean to say that God is love? Well, first, we have to not understand it in a romantic or sentimental way. God's love is not understood as a feeling, an emotion, or attitude. In a way, we can see it as an act of self-giving. As John says in our reading God reveals his love for us by giving his Son to us.

As I have pointed out in the past in biblical Greek there are three different words for love , which reveals the ways in which is expressed. The first of those words is 'Eros', which describes the way in which love is shared by two people in an intimate and sexual manner. When we speak of Aphrodite as the goddess of love we are referring to her as the goddess of sexual love. Eros is the word from which we derive the word erotic.

Secondly, there is the word 'philos'. This is primarily the manner of love that we have between friends and family. But it can also be expressed in terms of ideas. For example, if you take the Greek words 'philos' and 'Sophia', and stick them together, you come up with the word 'philosophy' , which means ' love of wisdom'.

Now, when John says we must love one another, that appears to suggest a philos kind of love, which it does in part, but it goes deeper than that...which brings us to the third and deepest form of love, called 'agape', which is unconditional love. This is the form of love in which God embraces us, and in which we are called to embrace one another. Not always an easy thing to do. As John writes, "Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another". We may not be able to love one another unconditionally on our own, but we can move in that direction when we allow God's love to dwell within us. Again, as John writes, "we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit". We receive this Spirit through faith, and, as John says, through confession of Jesus as the Son of God.

Does that mean that those who do not confess Jesus as the Son of God are cut off from the love of God. There are certainly those who say that is the case, but, personally, I would have to say no. I find it difficult to say that God's love is unconditional, and then attach a condition to it.

An atheist, for example, may cut his or herself off from the experience of God's love within, but that does not mean that God has ceased to love them. Down through the centuries ideas of Christian exclusivity has led to the suffering of many, especially in the lives of indigenous peoples and adherents of other religions.

For us Christians our faith in Jesus as the Son of God, and acceptance of him as our gift from God is the pathway through which we experience the depths of divine love, and, as John says through our knowledge of that love we have no fear. The fear that he is referring to is the fear of God's judgement, but the gift of Jesus, revealed to us in his self-giving life, death, and resurrection has released us from the bondage of sin and the fear of death. John goes on to say that it is perfect love that casts out fear, but who among us can honestly say that we have perfect love. We are human, which makes us far from perfect, but that is where the Spirit within comes in. The Spirit, which I will discuss further on the day of Pentecost, leads us, and guides us in the direction of perfect love; and move in that way in our commitment to love our brothers and sisters, and when we fail in that regard we are failing in our love for God.

Now, in the context of John's letter he is addressing a specific Christian congregation, which suggests that he is talking about brothers and sisters within the Body of Christ, but in his teachings Jesus pushes us beyond such a boundary - that our brothers and sisters exist beyond the walls of the church, that the love of God within us compels us to extend that love to all people, even our enemies according to Jesus, and in this time of ecological and environmental crisis, we have to include a love for the whole of Creation. Again, that's a tall order, but one to which we can respond with the help of the Spirit within us - the God who is love. Amen.

Let us pray: O Lord, whose very essence is love, we thank you that when we open ourselves in faith, we are making room for your Spirit to dwell within us, leading us towards the perfection of love, enabling us to extend that love to others. You are a God whose love is unconditional, and we are grateful for that, but we find it difficult for us. It is generally easy to love friends and family, but there are those people who are not easy to love, and that is where we need the help of your Spirit, the Spirit who through faith dwells within us. Help us to break down the walls within ourselves that make it hard for us to love in the way that you would have us do. Show us how to love more perfectly in a way that is not only directed towards all people, but extends to the whole of your Creation, all to the glory of your name. Amen.