

“Making Love Like God” – 1 John 3:16-24

Was there ever a word that was more over-used than “love”? Perhaps it’s the age of communication that we live in that seems to dilute the concept of love to the point of it becoming meaningless. Love permeates music, from the overly-long dying scenes in an opera through the interminably-long “My Heart Will Go On and On and On and On and On...” of a more populist diva, to the “I love my dog/truck/fishing pole of Country classics. Love is the central theme of much writing, whether drama or fiction. But if we stop to think about it for a moment previous years, previous centuries, even previous millennia have suffered under the same dilution. Five hundred years ago troubadours traveling throughout Europe and Britain sang popular love songs. Fifteen hundred years ago poets were penning love poems in ancient Persia. Three thousand years ago King David sent the husband of his mistress to die in battle. Love seems to have been an obsession of humanity from before human memory.

Even in the days and years following Jesus’ death and resurrection it seems that love was a central issue of concern, as we see from our reading from 1 John. Although this writing is called an ‘Epistle’ (which means “letter”) it lacks the characteristic features of a real letter and appears more like a sermon, or even a theological essay. In any event, the author – most likely the same author who wrote the Gospel of John – obviously had a passionate desire to lovingly explain some aspects of our Christian faith to the reader. The gentle style of persuasion in these writings, often more affirming than arguing, seems to hint at relating to people who are troubled, who are fragile in their faith, who have concerns about whether or not they can believe or are right in their believing in Christ.

Can we identify the fears with which John’s readers were wrestling? To begin with the ending, the conclusion to the section that we read offers a reassurance and affirmation that we are indeed inextricably connected with Christ. I think we can reasonably assume then that the intended audience were people who were trying to grasp how it could be that Christians could contend that Christ abides in us. Elsewhere John deals extensively with a popular belief of the time called Gnosticism – from the same word that we know as ‘knowledge’ – which held that no way could God dwell within a human, as we believe he did in Jesus. Here John helps their understanding by affirming that God even abides in us through the Holy Spirit.

But that affirmation begs another question, namely “how would we know?” and so John’s argument builds to this conclusion by outlining that we will know through two paths – faith, and obedience. Faith in Jesus Christ as Son of God, and obedience to God’s commandments, in particular the most important commandment that we love one another. This argument, however, reveals yet another fear or confusion on the part of people, namely “how can one have the world’s goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help?” – in other words, is it necessary to abandon a ‘normal’ lifestyle, give everything away to charity, and become a monk in order to be a faithful Christian?

We can be fairly sure that people in John’s day were wrestling with these kinds of questions, in part because people today are still wrestling with the same kinds of questions. “Can I truly be a Christian if I have a home, a car, three meals a day, a TV, ...?” Oddly enough, not all Christians are asking those kinds of questions, because a huge segment of today’s church actually goes to the limits of the totally opposite direction, namely proclaiming that being a ‘true’ Christian will result in God shining down upon you with perfect teeth for that perfect smile, a perfect job that ensures that perfect home on the edge of the golf course, a pair of perfect SUV’s, and a perfect family with 3.2 darling children. That kind of “consumer Christianity” puts a new dimension to the question posed in our reading, “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 help?”

Many of us, and I would venture to say that means all of us who take our faith seriously, ask these same kinds of anxious questions of ourselves from time to time. “Can I be sure?” “How can I know?” “How is it possible that God could love me so much?” Or the really dangerous but all-too-common question, “How could God not drop me like a brick when He discovers who I really am?”

It seems the answer to that question “how can I be sure I’m reconciled with God in Christ?” lies somewhere between the two polar opposites of a Trappist Monk and a big-smile, bad-hairpiece televangelist. The key issue is what one means by ‘love’, especially what it was that Christ meant by ‘love one another’, and the answer is here also. “By this – i.e. loving not in words or speech but in truth and action – we will know that we are from the truth and will reassure our hearts before him.” Making love like God, in other words. Turning the static, intellectual noun ‘love’ into the active, participatory gerund ‘loving.’ The same kind of loving that God acted out in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

And to those who wonder how long it will be before God discovers who they really are, John offers the reassurance that “we will know that we are from the truth and will reassure our hearts before him whenever our hearts condemn us; for God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything.” There is no need to worry that your reconciliation with God, your acceptance by God, your forgiveness from God in Christ is somehow temporary, transient, fragile, or probationary. He knows everything ... and you are forgiven in Christ. God is not going to some day be surprised by somehow discovering stuff you thought was hidden from Him, and drop you like a hot brick. Through God’s loving you, Christ abides in you and you abide in Christ, by the power of the Holy Spirit at work within you. You have no secrets hidden from God, and you are forgiven in Christ, so have boldness before God.

But how can we, you ask, dare to be bold before God the way John declares? Well, he offers the answer to that also, and that is to obey God’s commandments and do what pleases him. Now note carefully that John is not arguing here that obedience to God’s commandments means slavish observance of religious rules, and he explicitly defines the commandment he means: “that we should believe in the name of God’s Son Jesus Christ and love one another.” Love he has defined as not word or speech, but truth and action.

So what truth and action would constitute making this God-like love? We think of the constant prophetic voice from the Old Testament calling God’s faithful to “love justice and walk humbly with your God.” We hear the words of Jesus proclaiming “when you did it – i.e. fed the hungry, clothed the naked, healed the sick, comforted the lonely and grieving – to the least of these, you did it to me” and are reminded that true love is a verb, not a noun. Even in Matthew’s gospel where we often hear a hint of observance to rules we hear the clear countering condemnation of the Scribes and Pharisees who “laid impossible burdens upon the people and lifted not a finger to help them.”

Someone close to me asked me the other day as I was working on this text, “but how do you respond to someone who loves you and you don’t love them?” to which I replied that we are not called to necessarily like one another, only to love them. Loving them means treating them – including the ones we don’t necessarily like – with respect, kindness, patience, dignity, and justice. Making love like God means reaching out sacrificially to help others, to support them, to comfort them, to uplift them, and yes sometimes to gently correct them, all of it done with respect and dignity and justice. In this we will know that we are from the truth and will reassure our hearts before him.