

Hopkins South Monterey

United Methodist Church

Affecting Lives Through Jesus Christ

Scripture & Sermon

May 2, 2021

Pastor Kelsey

1 John 4:7-21

7 Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. 8 Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. 9 God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. 10 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. 11 Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. 12 No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.

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

17 Love 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. 18 There 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. 19 We love because he first loved us. 20 Those 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. 21 The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.

Prayer & Sermon

God of love and new life,

Thank you for this time to be together. Thank you for this time with you. Bless this time we have to spend with your Word. Help us to hear what you know we need to hear, and help us to put what we learn about you and ourselves into action. In the name of the Son and Spirit, Amen.

Almost a year ago now, a collection of Irish donors returned an old favor. From a New York Times article telling the story, “More than 170 years ago, the Choctaw Nation sent \$170 to starving Irish families during the potato famine. A sculpture in County Cork commemorates the generosity of the tribe, itself poor. In recent decades, ties between Ireland and the Choctaws have grown.

Now hundreds of Irish people are repaying that old kindness, giving to a charity drive for two Native American tribes suffering in the Covid-19 pandemic. As of Tuesday, the fund-raiser has raised more than \$1.8 million to help supply clean water, food and health supplies to people in the Navajo Nation and the Hopi Reservation, with hundreds of thousands of dollars coming from Irish donors, according to the organizers.

Many donors cited the generosity of the Choctaws, noting that the gift came not long after the United States government forcibly relocated the tribe and several other American Indian groups from the Southeastern United States, a march across thousands of miles known as the Trail of Tears that left thousands of people dead along the way.

“I’d already known what the Choctaw did in the famine, so short a time after they’d been through the Trail of Tears,” Sean Callahan, 43, an Apple administrator in Cork City who made a donation, said on Tuesday. “It always struck me for its kindness and generosity and I see that too in the Irish people. It seemed the right time to try and pay it back in kind.”

On Sunday the organizers wrote in praise of “acts of kindness from indigenous ancestors passed being reciprocated nearly 200 years later through blood memory and interconnectedness.”

The original gift from the Choctaw nation was an act of radical and generous love that went against the standards of our world and instead lived into the love of God to share what little the Choctaw nation had to help others that needed some help. Though it wasn’t a huge gift, the demonstration of love that it was left a lasting memory and impact on those communities. It is stories like these that are big reminders of what an impact living out of love instead of fear can have on others. It is these kinds of gestures, and others coming from the same heart, that 1 John is encouraging us to live out ourselves.

The passage we read today from 1 John 4:7-21 re-emphasizes some of the same ideas that we discussed last week with chapter 3. 1 John on the whole is a repetitive letter. It spirals and circles back to the same points again and again while building off the main core: the centrality of love to our faith and being children of God. Chapter 3 gave some definition to what is meant by the command to love, saying, “Let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.” Chapter 4 continues some of the same themes of loving others because God love us, this time expanding a bit more on what it means for God to love us first.

Chapter 4 lays out this simple, yet not as simple to live out, argument. Starting with, Love one another because God is love. That phrase, “God is love,” may be more

familiar to you. This is where it comes from! That said, much of the verses in this passage are quotable ones. Anyway, the argument being laid out here starts with, Love one another because God is love. Which leads to, "If you love, then you know God! Therefore you are born of God, believe in God, and abide in God. If not, the opposite. All of that works because of this central point of the passage: God loved us first and that love is revealed to us in Jesus's incarnation, life, death, and resurrection. So, we are called to respond by sharing the love inspired in us by God with all those we meet, all of our siblings in God.

This is a fairly straightforward argument, but makes some significant points about God. It is no small thing to claim God as love. It is God who is love, not love that is God. All love stems from God. God's attributes define what love is, our idea of love does not define who God is. Since all love comes from God, then it makes sense that God loved us first. It would be easy to skim right by that statement and accept it on face value. But, if we dwell on it for a moment, we can start to sort out just how much this short phrase implies. We ought to remember that God loved us first and continues to love us first, thus reminding us that we don't have to do anything to win God's grace or love. God's grace and love is not transactional. Remembering God loved us first is also a reminder that God, loving all of creation, yearns for us to live in line with God's Shalom, or peace. It is God's love for us that drives the work of the Spirit in our hearts and minds when we grow toward living holy and righteous lives as children of God.

One of the biggest ways we have seen and continue to share that God loved us first is in Jesus. God's love for creation was revealed through sending Jesus to live among us, to teach us, to shift the way we understand our relationship with God, and then taking on death and proving that the evil forces do not have the last word. Verse 10 expands a bit on how Jesus reveals God's love, it says, "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." "Atoning sacrifice" is not a term we hear outside of the Bible or the church very much at all. Because of that, it is easy for us to nod along and think we know what it is saying, without ever hearing what it actually means. Often when we hear the word sacrifice in the Bible, especially when it has to do with Jesus, we think of the crucifixion. In Christianity we often talk about the crucifixion as the sacrifice of Jesus for our sins. It is important to note that here in 1 John 4, the term sacrifice is used, but there is nothing said of the death or crucifixion here. Perhaps the sacrifice of Jesus referred to in verse 10 is about more than just Jesus's death on the cross. That word "Atoning" gives us some indication how we are supposed to think of this sacrifice. The word atonement, outside of the Bible or Christian theology means "reparation for a wrong." So when Christians talk about Jesus as an atoning sacrifice, many talk about the crucifixion as a moment of atonement in that way or a necessary sacrifice needed to gain all of humanity God's grace and salvation. To be a bit dramatic, the term is often used to say that we needed the violent death of Christ for God's thirst for blood to be satiated and then we could be forgiven. There's that transaction language again. It turns out that Atonement is another one of those words whose meaning has shifted over time to mean something quite different than how it started. Before it shifted, the word atonement meant what it spells if you break apart the word a big: At-one-ment. In its

origins this word meant “the process of becoming one with someone or something.” When 1 John was written, this meaning would have been the intended message in “Atoning sacrifice.” So, a sacrifice to make us one, a sacrifice to reconcile us back to God. That is less about a one and done sacrifice, “Jesus died for your sins and that’s it!” This is about how Jesus dedicated his life and put his life on the line to share with the world a new way to live in relationship with our triune God—Father, Son, and Spirit. We live into Jesus’s work by recognizing our sins, where things are wrong and we need to fix them, and in repentance and giving up those things that aren’t as they should be to find atonement (at-one-ment). Jesus’s whole story, his incarnation—or becoming human, birth, life, death, and resurrection tells us that sin will not have the last word. Our failings do not define our relationship with God. There is always another opportunity to be at one with God. And that is all because of God’s first love of all of us.

The foundation of this discussion on love shared with us in 1 John is that first love from God and the promise through Jesus that that love will always be there for us to return to and grow closer to no matter our sins. The rest of the passage tells us what we should do with that, because our faith would be pretty flat if all we ever did was acknowledge God’s love for us and then keep it to ourselves and do nothing about it. God loves us which can have a profound effect on us internally, but to manifest God’s love, to reveal it outside of ourselves, we must share in God’s love by loving others. God’s love was witnessed to us by the gift of Jesus and his atoning sacrifice, and that love is perfected and manifested in the mutual love shared in community. Verses 11 and 12 remind us that God’s love is perfected when we live out God’s love both in our inner circles and those we consider other from ourselves. We can then point back to last week’s passage and the command to love in truth and action to remember what that looks like.

Now, the amazing and transformational thing about love, is that the more that we put God’s love for all of us into action by living love with all our siblings, is the more that we are inviting God’s love into our hearts and the more we will come to love and know God. The more that we live out the way God wants us to be at-one with each other by living out love above all else, the more our hearts will function out of love, the more we will abide in love, and because God is love and God loved us first, when love is what abides in our hearts, God is abiding in us. When we best remember God’s love for us and live out that love in the way we treat others and abide with God in love, we cast fear out of our lives. When we center ourselves on God’s love for us we need not fear punishment for our sins, but are reassured that we can repent and be transformed and find a new way. When we center our actions on love and come together in communities founded on abiding with God and loving others, we need not fear rejection or being left alone to fend for ourselves in the world. And it goes both ways, when we love others we reject fearing them. Fearing others is an obstruction to loving them. Perfecting love in us casts out fearing the other, and instead brings us to abiding with God and sharing in God’s vision and love for all creation.

I experience a piece of what that perfected love can be at camp. My first summer at camp after 10th grade up at Lake Louise was the first time in my life that I really felt surrounded by the love of God and felt the presence of God with me was at camp. That

first time, I was going to have to go to that strange new place where I knew no one all by myself. I was so nervous! I had a hard time feeling like I fit in in high school, and now I was going to be stuck far from home surrounded by strangers for a whole week. I was so worried that I wouldn't fit in there, like at school, and I would be miserable all week. Now, looking back, I wish I could pop back and reassure 15 year old me that camp is a different kind of place and a different kind of community.

By the first evening I was texting my parents and my pastor who convinced me to go to camp, how glad I was that I came and I was sure it would go well. I had already experienced in half a day that this was a community centered on love. That love continued and was repeated in the following years. Something about the way all these different people come together for camp creates a community that all of us high schoolers from around the state, from a wide array of backgrounds, and with all different hobbies can come together in a way unlike anywhere else. Camp puts everyone from rich to poor, from jock to band nerd, from freshmen to seniors on an equal playing field. When we are all thrown in together as equals and without any preconceived ideas of each other, we get to build our community from the ground up. The special part about Christian camp is that when building a community there, it is founded with the intention of embodying God's love, grace, and care.

When successful, like I was blessed to experience, it doesn't take long to feel the difference from our normal communities. Within hours of my first time at camp, the love shared by the community, embodying God's love, was so clear that all of my fear for what the week could bring fell away. As I was welcomed into the community with love and grace, I lived it out through the week and I was part of keeping that culture of the community in the following years that I attended.

This community based on love, yes shared love from my peers, but also, of equal importance, it was through that community of mutual love that I felt God with me in ways that I had never experienced before. By the end of the week, I left with more faith that God was real and out there and present with me than I had had in my life.

Now, every year I go to camp I get a taste of the kind of love described in 1 John 4; a love that comes from God, that is shared among people, and that casts out fear.

This is the kind of community described as possible in 1 John 4. Let us do all we can to follow the commandment given to us by Jesus: Those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also. And in putting that commandment in action, let us celebrate the love that God has for each and every one of us that comes to abide more deeply in each of us.

God of fresh starts, of new beginnings, of renewal and restoration. We awake to your grace, embraced by love unconditional. With each morning you birth new possibilities in us; around us. We are surrounded by Sacred potential. There are so many ways to love. May we rise to the day's call to give attention to what aches, to celebrate surrounding

beauty, to be a companion to justice, and to drink from the deep well of joy. In the name of the son and spirit, Amen. [Enfleshed.com]