

April 29, 2018

1 John 4: 7-21

Prayer: Dear Lord, please go with us into the study of your word. We fervently believe that your inspiration as to its understanding abides with us still. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

The Maypole Letter

A couple of years ago, our son Taylor was in town. I had him sing two songs – one by Woody Guthrie, one by John Prine -- to represent modern-day parables.

I think that a song that tells an entire story in 3 minutes is probably the closest thing we have to the little stories Jesus told. And songwriters like Guthrie and Prine are certainly among our prophets.

But then there are also unsung, modern-day parables. Here's one from a sermon by the late John Claypool:

A man stepped into a new car. A young boy, standing nearby, asked him, "Is that a new car?"

The man responded, "It sure is! My brother gave it to me."

The boy was amazed. "You mean your brother just gave you a new car?"

"He sure did," the man replied.

The young boy said, "I wish"

The man expected him to say he wished he had a brother like that. But instead, the boy said, "I wish ... I could give my brother a car like that."

I wish ... I could give my brother a car like that.

Here's another. It didn't come out of the Christian tradition, but from Nischala Joy Devi's yoga teaching. But it's just as illustrative of kingdom thinking.

A wise woman was traveling in the mountains and found a precious stone in a stream. She placed it in her bag.

The next day she met a fellow traveler. He was hungry so she opened her bag to share her food. The traveler glimpsed the precious gemstone and admired it. He then asked the woman to give it to him. The woman pulled the sparkling jewel from her bag, and without hesitation, handed it over.

The traveler left, rejoicing in his good fortune. He knew the jewel was worth enough to support him for the rest of his life.

But a few days later, he returned to find the woman. He returned the stone and said, "I have been thinking. I know how valuable the stone is, but I would like to exchange it for something much more precious. Please teach me the secret that enabled you, without hesitation, to give me this precious stone."

Teach me the secret that enabled you to give me this precious stone.

This kind of *selflessness* is something all the great religions aspire to spark within us. It certainly is the aspiration of Christianity.

As we end our readings in 1 John today, I'll admit that a lot of my recent sermons may have sounded alike. That's because of the way this epistle of 1 John reads. It is repetitive. It goes round and round and circles back and repeats again.

If John were writing in a newsroom, he would've been edited down to one sermon's worth.

In today's passage, he combines a lot of his former comments into one segment that I think is the pinnacle of his argument. Please turn in your Bibles to **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. ⁸Whoever 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. 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.

¹⁹ We 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 must love their brothers and sisters also.

May Day is coming up on Tuesday. I'm not sure anyone dances around a maypole anymore, but picture one for a moment -- all those ribbons circling and crossing around a pole. Or for you gardeners, think about how a bean plant grows up and around and around a bean pole.

This is how John writes. His thinking is cyclical, not linear. Repetitive, not straightforward.

But if we were to reach into this circular passage and yank out two declarative statements, this is what they'd be:

1. God loves us, and showed it by the concrete act of coming to earth to live and die for us.
2. The way we accept that love is to perform concrete acts of love toward those around us.

When we accept the love of God, we'd rather *give* a car to a brother than receive one.

When we accept the love of God, we'd rather receive *the secret* to giving than receive a precious jewel.

All else in this letter are tendrils, corollaries, growing from those encircling plants, springing from those encircling Maypole ribbons.

Dr. Fisher Humphreys is a retired professor from Beeson Divinity School in Birmingham, Ala. In an essay he asked readers to respond to two questions.

- 1) Am I *a* Christian?
- 2) Am I Christian?

I think most of us could respond easily to the first question. *Sure, I'm the noun, a Christian. I believe Jesus Christ is Lord, and I count myself his follower.* But am I the adjective Christian? Do I behave like Christ, which is what that adjective implies?

People can look at us and describe us with all sorts of adjectives: short, tall, blond, brunette, auburn, quiet, loud, kind, careless, neat, sloppy, reflective, active, shy, bossy. But would their list of adjectives include ... Christian? Being Christ-like? Behaving as Jesus behaved. Loving as Jesus loved.

That's what John, writing to a group of early Christians, is talking about. How we would earn the *adjective* Dr. Humphreys talked about – *Am I Christian?* This is how, writes John.

“Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God.”

The little boy in the first story certainly seems to know God, doesn't he? We learn in human development theory that nothing is more selfish than a human infant. An infant is totally preoccupied with his own comfort -- a full stomach, a dry diaper, warmth, softness. It takes a degree of maturity to honestly care about someone outside ourselves.

I wish I could give my brother a car like that.

John's passage goes on to say how we know about this God of love. **“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.”**

This is one of those places that makes us think the same person wrote both the gospel of John and this epistle. You can hear echoes of John's gospel here:

“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.”(John 3:16)

The epistle writer then makes the point that God loved us *first*. This wasn't something we came up with. **“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.”**

Now, if this were Paul writing, he might camp out here awhile, discussing theology, discussing the theory of atoning sacrifice. But John never, ever, ever does that. Right after this glancing mention that God loved us enough to send his Son, he writes:

“Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.”

John is like a dog with a steak bone. He never lets up on this idea that the *only* way we show our love for God, the *only* way we show if we are Christian or not, is our behavior toward others.

If we have somehow missed that message, he circles around one more time, tying that ribbon a little tighter, fastening those bean plants more firmly to the pole.

“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. The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.”

We have read that passage or one just like it every Sunday that we’ve been looking at 1 John. I would say it’s John’s most constant and consistent message.

Worship is empty if it isn’t connected to love of our brothers. Worship is meaningless if it isn’t connected to love of our sisters.

Every once in a great while, someone will ask me why we don’t list our beliefs on our website. Why we don’t write down what creeds we follow, what theological premises we agree with, what beliefs we espouse.

For one thing, that strikes me as way too much work. But I also hide behind 1 John on this one. We either show our love through our actions or we don’t.

I’m afraid that if we started listing beliefs on our website, all it could do is exclude someone who doesn’t adhere to one of them. I’d much rather have a person come on in and be shown love rather than have him agree with me or some board decision on doctrine.

In the old days, God whispered as much to his prophets. Through Amos, God told the people of Israel:

²¹ I hate, I despise your festivals,

and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.

²² Even though you offer me your burnt-offerings and grain-offerings,

I will not accept them;

and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals I will not look upon.

²³ Take away from me the noise of your songs;

I will not listen to the melody of your harps.

²⁴ But let justice roll down like waters,

and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. (Amos 5: 21-24)

What is justice, but a means of loving one another in fairness and equality? What is righteousness but behaving honorably, lovingly, toward another?

On my way to the post office every day, I pass a billboard that says, “Be the rich eccentric relative you wish you had.” It’s advertising a money management website, but I like the sentiment: *Be the rich eccentric relative you wish you had.*

Don’t worry about what somebody’s going to give you. Find a way to give to them.

In our world of jewels and Mercedes, would we rather have an emerald that could set us up for life, or the wisdom of one who unthinkingly gives emeralds away?

What would it take for us to want to *give* a brother a fine new Mercedes – rather than have a brother who could buy one for us?

In seeking those answers, John promises that we will find the God no one has seen.

“If we love one another,” he says, **“God lives in us.”**

That’s a pretty big if. It’s also a pretty big promise.

Amen.