

## **“When Christians Get It Right”**

**Pastor Dave Carlson  
First Presbyterian Church  
Sunday, January 27, 2013**

### **Old Testament Lesson – Psalm 36:5-10 New Testament Lesson – 1 John 4:11-21**

R. Alan Culpepper tells the story<sup>1</sup> of a hardworking farmer who is visited with unexpected good fortune. The Lord appears to him and grants three wishes, but the catch is that whatever the Lord does for the farmer will be given double to his neighbor. The farmer is thrilled, and wishes for a hundred cattle. Immediately the wish is granted, and the farmer is ecstatic, until he sees that his neighbor has 200 cattle. So he wishes for a hundred acres of land, and again is overjoyed, until he sees that his neighbor has 200 acres.

Rather than celebrating God’s goodness, the farmer cannot escape feeling jealous and cheated because his neighbor has received more than he has. Finally, he states his third wish: that God would strike him blind in one eye.

We chuckle – perhaps a bit out of uncomfortableness, and God weeps. God weeps, because God would know nothing of human jealousy and spite. God looks around at the way we run things in this world, and God weeps, because God would know nothing of social injustice – the underclass looked down upon by those who have risen a level above – and we all have people above us and below us.

God feels the percussion of bombs exploding as they rip through homes and offices the world over, and God weeps, because God would know nothing of warring nations and terrorist attacks.

God feels the insults, the backtalk, the lies and anger of family members, friends, schoolmates, and coworkers, and God weeps, because God would know nothing of strained and broken relationships, relationships fueled by hurt and misunderstanding.

God weeps over our inability and unwillingness help a brother or sister in need; God weeps at the horror of armed conflict spurred on by national and religious intolerance; God weeps when you or I respond with words and actions that are hurtful and hateful. God weeps, because God has poured out upon us divine love, and still we hate.

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<sup>1</sup> The Gospel of Luke, *The New Interpreter’s Bible* (1995).

God is Love. And whenever we fail to search for and respond with Love, God weeps.

Over the past three Sundays, we have seen that there are some basic trouble areas that arise within the Christian faith. First, that we sometimes think we're better than others – or at least that's what some people think we think, when we don't think that at all;

Second, that some Christians feel lost, cheated or defective when bad things happen – like we're supposed to have it better than others, when in fact we're not necessarily given an easy life, but merely a faithful way of responding to the difficulties of life;

And third, last week, we looked at how broken and misguided our social systems can be, and how sometimes we don't know whether to just give up on our Christian values and play by the world's rules, or withdraw altogether, instead of stay in the game and looking for – and being a champion of – the successes God is achieving, the places where God is using good to overcome the bad.

And today, we hear the apostle John tell of God's love for us, and we think it sounds all nice and everything, but we know the truth. We know that love will only get you so far and that one has to protect oneself – eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth if that's what it takes.

The fourth trouble area that arises within the Christian faith is failing to trust the power of Divine Love in our lives and in our world, when in fact, Love is the most courageous and powerful response we could have to any situation.

Our problem is we just don't see it or believe it, that love can be that powerful of a response. But thank God, we have been given a solution to that problem. We can come to see and believe in the power of God's love working – in our lives and in our world – if we but give ourselves over to it. And that takes courage.

So to encourage us, God gives us ***the Holy Scriptures***. In our NT lesson for today, the first letter of John encourages us with a series of descriptions or statements about love. First he says, "Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another." Seems pretty simple, yet we fail at it everyday. So John adds to this, saying, "If we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us." Wow, is John saying that God's love is incomplete without us? Yes. Love requires the act of giving, and without "the other," there is no gift. In divine love, says John, God has given us the Holy Spirit, and sent us – given us – God's son as Savior of the world.

***Lovers give, and haters take.***

Seems pretty simple, but we fail at it everyday. So John adds to this, saying, "Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness on the Day of Judgment, because as (Christ) is, so are we in this world."

Those who follow the teachings of Jesus Christ know and believe and trust in the power of God's gracious and merciful love for all creation, which actually includes you and me as individuals.

In a fairy tale riddle titled "The Magic Mirror"<sup>2</sup>, a troll asks a boy, who I'll call Jack, "to name the strongest bond in the world. (Jack) thought and thought. He said to himself, 'If my brother the sailor were to guess this riddle, he would say the strongest bond in the world is the horizon. It joins the sky and sea together and gives us our place in the world.

If my brother the farmer were to guess this riddle, he would say the strongest bond in the world is the rainbow. It joins the rain and sun together so that the crops can grow. But I guess the strongest bond in the world is the bond of love. Not even death can destroy it.'" Love is the strongest bond in the world, and still we choose hate.

So the Apostle John continues, saying, "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."

While we may know in our heart of hearts that lovers give and haters take, it is only in Christ that we have the courage to give of ourselves in love even when surrounded by world of takers and haters. Christ has overcome the power of hate by giving himself freely and without fear to the greediest and most hateful takers, one could imagine those who crucify him. **Lovers are fearless, and haters are afraid;** haters, really, just show their fear.

Norman Shockley's little book, "Back From the Edge,"<sup>3</sup> tells with biblical certainty of a future where the lion and lamb will lie down together, where lambs need no longer fear the lion.

This doesn't mean, he writes, that the lion becomes lamblike. "That would be victory for the lamb absorbing the lion! That is almost as sad as the lion devouring the lamb." Rather, the biblical image "means that freedom is possible for creatures of great difference through accepting each other. The lamb is freed from fear, and the lion is freed from the need to affirm its ferocity."

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<sup>2</sup> "The Magic Mirror, Kristen R. Morsy, (Cricket, 8 April 1981).

<sup>3</sup> Nashville: Upper Room, 1980.

Lovers are fearless, and haters are afraid. And knowing this, still we fail to love one another. So, John adds to this, saying, "We love because (God) first loved us."

**Lovers go first, haters hold back.** Everybody's waiting for the other person to go first. But can you imagine if your first response to anything was love instead of fear or suspicion or defensiveness or self-preservation. We hold back. But God's love does not. Those who respond in God's love know that God has their back. Jesus responded to insult after insult with love all the way to the cross. And God had his back. Can you respond in love like that, and not hold back? Haters hold back. They wait to be sure it's safe, and when fear tells them it isn't, their lost. They just can't see any hope for themselves or anyone else.

And so John adds to this, saying, "Those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen cannot love God whom they have not seen."

**Lovers see God, haters miss out.** And even if we believe this, still we fail to love one another.

So, John adds to this, saying, "The commandment we have from (God) is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also."

It's that simple. Lovers give and haters take, lovers are fearless and haters are afraid, lovers go first and haters hold back, lovers see God and haters miss out. And still, knowing and believing all of this, just isn't enough for us. John adds to all of this the central point of his letter, written to those who would follow Christ and serve the Lord: John says, "God is Love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them."

**Love is God, and hate is ungodly.** It's that simple.

When we find ourselves stuck in the fourth trouble area that arises within the Christian faith, because we can't seem to trust the power of Divine Love – in our lives and in our world – even though we know that Love is the most powerful and courageous force in all creation, when we can't trust in Love, our solution is to love anyway, just because God says so: "The commandment ... from God is this:" if we love God we must love one another, no matter what that takes.

When Christians get it right, it's because they've believed and done what God has told them, and in that, God takes care of all of our needs, all of our fears, all of our doubts, and all of our reassurances. The Guinness Book of World Records lists the shortest sermon ever preached. It was given by John Albrecht, an Episcopal priest in

Michigan. He stood in the pulpit to preach, paused, and said "Love!" He then sat down. Some of Albrecht's church members said it was the best sermon he ever preached. Obviously, I am no John Albrecht, but ..., all that I have said to you today is this: "**Love!**" Go forth and love.

### **Pastoral Prayer**

Holy God, we are awed by your power, humbled by your mystery, astounded by your glory. We cannot help but respond in worship, at once prayerfully silent and yet bursting with unrestrained praise and joy. We celebrate you as the giver of life and all life's blessings.

You inspired Jesus to forsake the wisdom of the world for the folly of the cross. Prepare us to be disciples of such a Lord. Let us behold with him a world in which we shall not only avoid, but destroy, temptation; a world in which we shall not only plead for, but practice, forgiveness.

Anoint us, as you anointed him, to become the glad tidings we bear, and to be your answer to those in need.

Dear God, we are troubled and confused in a confusing, troubled world. We try to make sense out of the conflicting voices. We search to find one word that will make sense and give meaning to the rest.

Come near, Lord. Touch our hearts and souls; enfold your life around ours; speak that one cleansing, unifying word.

Express yourself, Lord, to us, in us, through us; in the name of Jesus, your beloved Son, who taught us to pray, saying:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.  
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts,  
as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation,

but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.