

Perfect Love

On the Second Sunday of this Eastertide, I confidently announced to you my intention of preaching primarily from the First General Epistle of John for the remainder of the Easter season and perhaps a little beyond. That'll teach me. As they say, "Man proposes and God disposes." Or, in the immortal words of Robbie Burns, "The best-laid schemes o' mice an' men / Gang aft agley," or something like that. Even as I made that forecast, I knew that I intended to lay aside I John in favor of the material prepared by the National Council of Churches for Earth Day, which had its Scriptural focus in Deuteronomy and Psalms. I was also still in conversation with members of the Worship Taskforce about the shape of our Fifth Sunday Worship and how closely we would adhere to the model popularized by the Community of Taizé. In the event, I read both the familiar Gospel lesson and the pericope from I John connected with the celebration of the Good Shepherd, which comes on the Fourth Sunday of Easter each year, and encouraged you to meditate on both during the Great Silence but I did not preach. Finally, I was too sick last week to either write a new sermon or to deliver even a previously written one, so instead of I John you heard what was by all accounts a fine sermon from Lynn Melby on Proverbs.

So, on this Sixth Sunday of Easter, a solid month removed from my first and last sermon on I John, it seems to me we might all do with a little refresher. What is this little book, pinned with its even shorter companions to the tail end of the corpus we know as the New Testament Epistles? What can we say about its author, never identified by name in any of the three missives that bear that most common of all names in the Christian world? What's it all about and what is of particular interest in today's segment? It is this last point that will occupy most of my attention this morning, for in the ruminations of John the Elder upon love and its opposite, fear, followers of Jesus have found deep meaning for nearly 2000 years. How readily to most of us come those simple yet profound truths proposed by John: God is love, we love because he first loved us, and perfect love casts out fear.

As I remarked last month, scholars have noted for centuries that this little book scarcely fits the definition of an epistle at all. It is less a personal letter and more a tract, published and spread abroad to teach and to correct. Judging from the content of the letter, the correction was meant to steer Christians away from the heresy that would become known as Docetism, the belief that the Christ only "seemed" to be human. In this school of thought, all matter was evil and therefore the Son of God could not possibly have become flesh. The false teachers this book warns against taught that humans were saved by their knowledge of the secrets of God and, once saved, were liberated from their flesh, so that actions of their bodies did not impact their now-sinless souls. This is a long way from the teachings of Jesus, who called his followers to a life that embodied both the justice and grace of God in language rooted in the goodness of Creation.

Both the language of I John and the tradition surrounding it link this little book to the Gospel which bears John's name and has been held for most of the Christian era to be the eyewitness account of "the Beloved Disciple," John the son of Zebedee. Indeed, the author of some of the oldest Christian documents we have that are not in the New Testament, Irenaeus, Bishop of Lyons from approximately A.D. 177 to 202, writes that as a boy, he was a student of Polycarp, Bishop of Smyrna, and that Polycarp, in turn, had been a student of John the Apostle in Ephesus. Irenaeus, less than 100 years removed from the writings of these documents, was convinced they came from the same hand, which seems more convincing to me than the speculations of any number of 19th and 20th Century scholars.

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Tradition tells us that John, who may have been a teenager when he followed Jesus in Galilee, was quite an old man by the time of the writing of this book. This is certainly consistent with the way in which he refers to his readers as “little children,” as well as with his own appellation for himself, πρεσβυτερος, “the elder,” in II and III John. Many have also found this identification of the writer to be fitting with the style of the writing. Unlike the muscular and intricate arguments offered by Paul, the writing in I John wanders a bit, repeating key ideas again and again, generally using deceptively simple language for profound concepts. I John reads like advice from an old man who falls back on familiar phrases he has used for so long that they have become polished and smoothed into proverbs. Aphorisms like the ones I mentioned previously, God is love, perfect love casts out fear, stick readily in the minds of the hearer but their full meanings only unfold over a lifetime of study. I also find in I John’s style the reminder that for all our attempts to westernize the Gospel, beginning with Paul’s careful Greek arguments to the Roman world, the core of our Judeo-Christian faith is an Oriental religion. We ignore the profound differences between the world of Jesus and John and our own at our peril.

But lest all this sound too forbidding, let me recall for us also that John says he writes this little tract, “so that our joy may be complete.” For all its polemic purpose, I John is essentially a restating of the Good News of God through Jesus: “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.” John comes back again and again in these five chapters and particularly in chapter four to the topic of God’s great love for humankind. In fact, Robert Brusick of Luther Northwestern Seminary notes that John uses the word love twenty-five times in our fifteen verses for the morning.

Perhaps this doesn’t seem as surprising as it should. After all, we of the 21st Century in American have become quite profligate with our use of the word “love,” haven’t we? I’m certainly no exception – I talk about how I love ice cream or the St. Louis Cardinals or optimistic science fiction like “Star Trek” or “Doctor Who” or favorite books or movies. I love our cats, which seems to be a small step up, somehow, and I love our kids, which is definitely more profound. I love my wife in a far nobler and higher way than ice cream (Did you know I love you better than ice cream?). All of this love can seem a little confusing, when you get right down to it.

In the κοινε Greek of the New Testament, there are several words which take the place of the one we use so indiscriminately. C.S. Lewis famously pointed out that there are four in his 1960 book, The Four Loves. That book made such an impact on me when I first read it as a teenager that I recently realized I have been referring to it for years without ever owning a copy. The copy that influenced me so must have come from the Kirkwood Baptist Church library. Lewis lists these words as στωργη, φιλια, ερος, and αγαπη.

The first three of these words are well-attested in Greek literature both prior to and following the writing of the books of the New Testament. As Lewis explains, στωργη is the fondness or affection we feel for that which is most familiar and comforting to us, ice cream or even family. We love these things because we are used to them and because they are not threatening to us. Στωργη is the warm fuzzy of the four Greek words for love.

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φιλία is the love between friends. Lewis describes φιλία as “the least biological, organic, instinctive, gregarious and necessary of our Loves,” and points out that our species does not need friendship in order to reproduce. Lewis says that friendship is exceedingly profound because it is freely chosen. There is also, in classic Greek writing, a sense of intense loyalty between φίλοι friends and, indeed, is used by Jesus to describe his relationship with his disciples in the True Vine passage in John’s Gospel. A relationship of true friendship is certainly never to be dismissed.

Ερως is the love best known to us as the combination of sensual and spiritual love enjoyed by lovers. It is the love also termed romance and the range of its positive and negative effects could easily fill far more than the time remaining to us. There is a fine and ancient tradition of using illustrations of erotic love to shed light on the intimacy and power of the relationship between God and humankind, as in the Song of Songs, but that is not the love of which John speaks in our passage.

The word used again and again by John and in most of the New Testament is ἀγάπη. It’s a rather odd word because it has very little attestation in Greek before the letters of Paul. In fact, the major use of ἀγάπη prior to the New Testament is in the Greek translation of the Old Testament book of Song of Songs, where it would seem that the translators were attempting to shift the emphasis of interpretation from erotic love poetry about a young man and a young woman to the allegory of love between God and humankind. But beginning with Paul, ἀγάπη becomes the go-to word to describe the love that characterizes God. C.S. Lewis describes it as the love that brings forth caring regardless of the circumstance. Writing on I John for the Broadman Bible Commentary, Edward McDowell says that ἀγάπη “denotes love by choice, love motivated by the will and implemented by action and conduct.” He cites as normative the teaching of Jesus concerning the love of enemies in the Sermon on the Mount: “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”

We will return to this idea of being perfect in a moment but first let us spend a little more time with ἀγάπη. In reading the New Testament, it becomes clear to us that God’s attitude of ἀγάπη toward the world shines through in God’s actions toward us. To the Romans, Paul writes, “God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.” John’s Gospel famously testifies that “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.” God loves so much that God is willing to give the very best of Godself to prove it.

For the old man writing his alternately furious and pleading tractate to those wandering from the Good News to which he has given his whole life, this is the attribute of God which is most important for them to know. God is love. More than the wisdom of God or the power of God or the majesty of God or even the righteousness and justice of God, John emphasizes to his “little children” and to the whole, still-broken world that God is love. I find myself wondering quite a

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bit lately what would happen if all those who worship the God of Abraham and Sarah, of Isaac and Rebekah, of Jacob and Leah and Rachel, of Joseph and Mary and Jesus were to focus on God's self-giving, all-encompassing love rather than on righteousness or majesty. I suspect we'd be a lot less likely to find fault in others or to defend our rights or beliefs against theirs. There would be a lot less strife in the world, I think, less violence and less hatred.

I'm inclined to believe that great Baptist divine of the last century, Rev. William Sloane Coffin, that "The opposite of love is not hate; the opposite of love is fear." When we forget to love, to carry ourselves in an attitude of *αγαπη*, we begin to fear or are lost to our fears. It is then that we begin to hate. *Αγαπη* love requires us to look beyond differences, even enmity. When, instead, we focus on differences, we fear. That one doesn't look like us – does that mean that somehow we are wanting? Or that they will reject us? That one doesn't believe what we do – does that mean that we are wrong? Our fears drive us to dismiss, to belittle, to hate those who are not like us so that we may retain our self-centered positions of the ones who are most important, most holy, most beloved. But in *αγαπη* love, we recognize the beauty of God's Creation in the differences between us – differences of skin tone or culture, differences of gender or orientation, differences in the way we understand God and the world – and we learn to celebrate those differences as the way we make our picture of God more complete, more perfect.

I promised earlier to come back to that word, used by Jesus and by John. "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect," said Jesus. "Perfect love casts out all fear," wrote John. How can we possibly be perfect? As is so often the case, we are dealing with a bad translation or at least one that has lost its accuracy in the drift of meaning. The Greek here is a form of *telios*, which doesn't mean "flawless," but "fulfilling its purpose." Eugene Peterson does a good job in The Message when he translates the phrase in I John as "well-formed love." Others have suggested "fulfilled, completed, matured." When our love is mature, as God would have it, then we can discard fear and face the world with the same love that Jesus represented.

And what then? The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. pledged to live in this fashion. "And I say to you, I have also decided to stick with love, for I know that love is ultimately the only answer to mankind's problems. And I'm going to talk about it everywhere I go. I know it isn't popular to talk about it in some circles today. And I'm not talking about emotional bosh when I talk about love; I'm talking about a strong, demanding love. For I have seen too much hate. I've seen too much hate on the faces of sheriffs in the South. I've seen hate on the faces of too many Klansmen and too many White Citizens Councilors in the South to want to hate, myself, because every time I see it, I know that it does something to their faces and their personalities, and I say to myself that hate is too great a burden to bear. I have decided to love. If you are seeking the highest good, I think you can find it through love."

Echoing Dr. King, I would say that I also have decided to stick with love. I have seen and heard and read too much about hate and fear. I have seen and heard too many Christians allowing fear to steer them into hate. I have seen the promise of peace in trouble spots around the world dashed out of fear and hate. I have been tempted myself by fear and hate but hate is simply too great a burden to bear. The key to the abundant life desired for us by God and promised by Jesus is the mature love that casts out fear and short-circuits hate.

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In his rambling, repetitive way, the old man John reminds us that love is what matters. God is love and out of that love, God has set us free. We can never hear that enough, I think. When I've worked in the past with students from Fuller Seminary or the Seattle University School of Theology and Ministry, I've told them again and again that the most important thing they have to say to the world is that God loves us all. I give you that charge as well for all of us who believe are commissioned by Jesus to take the Good News of God's love to the ends of the Earth. And because God loves us all, we are free to love in return – not just our Loving Creator but all of the Creation, too. Every man, woman and child, every bit of ground that God has given into our care, every bird of the air and beast of the field and every creature that swims in the sea; all are the rightful subjects of our love. No matter what else we accomplish in life, without love, we are nothing. Let us dedicate ourselves then to love, the ἀγάπη love modeled for us by God in Christ. Let us go into life, set free from fear, to love and to serve all that God loves. Amen.