

Love: Why? How?

a sermon
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1 John 4:7–21

Among all the things in the world that can be named

and pondered
and desired
and done,

it's likely that the one coming out at the very top is *love*.

Everyone wants love. Everyone *needs* love.

Love is the beginning of anything lovely and good, and the ultimate destination of every effort worth making.

“Love makes the world go 'round.”

“Love is a many splendored thing.”

“All you need is love.”

Let's get real.

I mean it.

For all the talk about love, all its focus, all its obvious importance, it should be just as obvious: love is hard.

Love is difficult.

Love is neither as easy nor as ever-present as some poets and singers seem to suggest.

The gap between the ideal of love and the reality of human loving is often strikingly, discouragingly broad.

Really, love is a hard thing. And that's in great part because human beings — we, of course, among them — can be difficult to be loved and can find it difficult to show love.

Yes, love would be so much easier if it weren't for the people.

People seem to have a talent for ruining the potential for love to flourish. They have a capacity for hate that appears to be greater than their capacity to love.

The sad story of human history is in great part the tale of hate's victorious progress

in violence
and war
and theft
and enslavement
and murder
and lynching
and genocide
and rape.

And yet, not only *must* love happen. Love *does* happen.

As Reinhold Niebuhr put it, love is “the impossible possibility.”

Love is a miracle we can see happening, if we look, many times a day.

Even so, love is neither easy nor obvious. And that easily and obviously leads many, maybe even some of us, to despair of the possibility of love’s own progress and victory. Many consider the challenge of showing love with a resigned “Why bother?” and with precious few ideas of how to actually pull it off.

We might well wonder: *why* love? And *how*?



The Bible passage I read talks a lot about love. So did the one from last week, as will the one for next week.

There’s a lot in this letter of First John about love. I think that there is so much there not because love is easy but because it isn’t.

If it were easy, if John thought that it was so easy and obvious that Christians must and will love each other, then he’d have said much less.

Instead, he hammers on this point. He wants his people to love:

really
and truly
and deeply
and actively.

He wants them to understand that love is not optional. He wants them to know that love is not just for the super-Christians.

And so he explains to them why they must love and how they must love.

He’s very straightforward about the “why.” The reason why we must love is found not in ourselves, not in the goodness of human beings, not in our inclination to be loving. No, the reason why we must love, as is the reason why we *can* love, is because of God’s love for us.

Hear it again:

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. 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. Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another.

Why love? What is the reason for loving? How is it possible to love?

We love because [God] first loved us.

There is and must be a direct line from God’s love for us supremely demonstrated in Jesus to our being people who love.

That’s the *why* of love.

Here’s the *how*.

It's seen in the way God loves us. It's seen in the sending of God's son. It's seen in Christ Jesus being "the atoning sacrifice for our sins."

That is how God loves us.

So the way we are to show love is like that. The form our love takes flows right from that same love. The love of Jesus Christ is the model for how we are to love. Our love is measured against and seeks to reflect God's own love. How God's love is shown to us is how we are to love each other.

Consider:

God has been patient with us.

That is how we are to love each other.

God has forgiven us.

That is how we are to love each other.

God does not hold our past against us.

That is how we are to love each other.

God is generous to us.

That is how we are to love each other.

All this is the *how* of love, the way we are to enact our love toward one another.



It *sounds* simple. And in some ways, it is. The simple fact is that God's love for us is both the *why* and the *how* of our love. God's love shows us that we, too, must love, and God's love shows us the way we are to love.

And yet even though this is simply stated it's not as if John represents this as easy. I think it's clear that he knows it's a challenge for us to love (yeah, for some of us more than others).

He's very realistic about this: realistic about the difficulty, realistic about the challenge.

And he sees this challenge as *fear*.

Yes, fear.

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.

Underneath all the hate, behind all the violence, pushing up from below all the aggression and suspicion and division, is fear.

The great obstacle to the growth of love in the hearts of those who love God and know Jesus is fear.

Fear is the most significant limiting factor for our progress in love.

Because of fear, we don't trust God.

Because of fear, we don't take risks.

Because of fear, we don't take action.

Because of fear, we fail to live, we fail to grow.

Because of fear, we stifle our compassion.

Because of fear, we keep ourselves apart and aloof.

Because of fear, we mourn a past we never really knew, and avoid a future about which we imagine the worst.

Because of fear, we go through elaborate schemes to protect ourselves, locking not just our doors but even our hearts.

It is fear that keeps us stalled in motionless self-regard, and fear that sends us careening wildly down roads of pointless desperation.

It is fear that makes us value

traditions more than possibilities,
money more than mercy,
the care of buildings more than the care of souls.

It is fear that keeps us from sharing the gospel, and fear that makes us reject the economic demands of the gospel.

It is fear that leads us to divide

the personal from the public,
the head from the heart,
the body from the soul,
the sacred from the secular,
the young from the old,
the past from the present,
“us” from “them.”

Fear turns churches into museums, and Christians into caretakers of the artifacts of tribal identity.

Fear is the soul-sucking threat to the love God requires of us, desires in us, enables from us.



God's love for us is the antidote to fear. God's love opposes fear. God's love evicts fear.

As you grow in love, fear's grip on your soul weakens, making you more able to love.

And what will that growth in love look like?

It's an ever increasing capacity to love

fearlessly,
courageously,
creatively,
with compassion,
and patience,
and forgiveness,
showing humility and confidence,
mercy and strength,
sympathy and judgment.

That's what it looks like.

Growing in love, we will seek to overcome the false divisions made by the fearful, and strive to unite

the personal and the public,
the head and the heart,
the body and the soul,
the sacred and the secular,
the young and the old,
the past and the present,
“us” and “them.”

That's what it looks like.

As we grow in love,

we will trust God,
we will take risks,
we will take action.

That's what it looks like.

With such love, we will draw on our past to lean into God's future.

With such love, we will care for the bodies and the souls of those who hunger.

With such love, we will serve those we don't yet know.

With such love, we will make room at the table for many.

That, my friends, is what Christian love looks like.

Let's see more of that.