

“Perfection in Love”

I John 4:7-21

May 10, 2009, Easter 5B

The Rev. Todd R. Goddard, pastor

Zion West Walworth United Methodist Church

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Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is 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. 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. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us. By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit.

And we have seen and do testify that the Father has sent his Son as the Savior of the world. God abides in those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God, and they abide in God. 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.

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. 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. We love because he first loved us. 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.

Prayer.

The great preacher, William Sloane Coffin,
Once made the point in a sermon on this text from 1st John
That the opposite of love is not hate;
The opposite of love is fear.¹
There is no fear in love, John’s author writes.
There is no fear of future outcomes,
Such as, when it comes to judgment day.
When we live in God,
And allow God to live in us
There is no fear of punishment or condemnation;
We’ll know the final outcome,
We’ll be confident, absolutely confident, in our salvation.

¹ David Bartlett, Professor of New Testament, Columbia Theological Seminary, Decatur, GA

Indeed, if we could invent a device that measured fear
- say, a meter that could be strapped to your arm
or connected to electrodes stuck to your head –
it would serve as an accurate barometer of how much love
there is in your life
and how much God there is in your life.
The greater the fear, the less the love.
Where there is little or no fear, love is great.
The mathematician in me would observe that love and fear are inversely proportional.

Consider the bully who confronts you in the cafeteria at school;
The bully's strength doesn't come from his or her muscles,
It comes from their ability to instill fear.
There is no love;
The bully certainly doesn't love the victim,
And the victim often does not love the bully.
The victim is often scared to death of the future outcome.
The fear meter would spike;
There would be an absence of love.
There would be an absence of God.
Consider the opposite end of our imaginary meter;
Where love is at it's maximum and there is no fear.
Think of the ideal, loving family.
It may be your own,
Or it may be the hope and desire of your dreams.
Where there is perfect love between each spouse,
Perfect love between each parent and child,
There is no fear.
There is no fear
That a simple argument will spiral out of control.
There is no fear of infidelity.
There is no fear
Of abuse or neglect.
There is no fear of abandonment or malice.
There is only love.

In many respects
Our Epistle lesson for this morning
Is asking each disciple of Christ to conduct an analysis;
A self-analysis of all the relationships we fear in life.
An analysis of our fears
Will reveal where our love is incomplete,

That is, where we have opportunities to grow in Christian love,
And where we can invite God into our lives.

Consider completing the statement, "I fear ..."

For example

"I fear being laid off or fired at work."

Perhaps the relationship between you and your boss and your coworkers
Can be improved with the addition of genuine love.

Consider tangible ways to infuse love into those relationships,
Whether or not your love is reciprocated.

Accept the extra task, to lessen the burden of another.

Practice kindness and respect at the water cooler as well as behind closed doors.

Search for ways to build, rather than ways to tear down.

Love builds trust,

Trust builds confidence.

Consider tangible ways to invite God into those relationships;

Pray that God will be present

In every encounter with the boss or with whom ever you fear.

Pray that God will be in you

And will work through you

In every word you say

In every effort you put forth.

For every deposit of love and God,

There is a corresponding withdrawal of fear.

Consider completing the statement, "I fear ..."

For example

"I fear my marriage is headed for divorce."

Perhaps the relationship between you and your spouse
Can be improved with the addition of genuine love.

That love may make an immediate improvement

Or it may be the beginning of a very long road back.

Your attempt at love may be reflected back

Or it may be the seed that will take years to germinate.

Every effort at love is a jewel in your crown.

Consider how God might be invited into the broken relationship.

The presence of God dwelling in you

And working through you

Is like water on a fire.

God's presence quenches fear

Regardless of the immediate outcome.

The benefits of God's love and presence are eternal.

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Consider completing the statement, "I fear ..."

For relationships in life that are more deeply rooted in the values and beliefs each of us hold.

For example,

I fear gay marriage.

I fear an African American president.

I fear a liberal Supreme Court judge.

I fear immigrants are flooding across the border and taking all our jobs.

I fear communists.

I fear Muslims.

I fear renters moving in to our neighborhood.

I fear the annual conference is going to raise our apportionments or try to close or merge our church.

I fear dying.

What is it that you fear?

Our fears reveal the absence of love,

The absence of God in our life,

And point us immediately towards where we can

Grow in Christian perfection.

The father of the Methodist movement, John Wesley,

Believed and taught that the goal of every disciple

Is Christian perfection.

He drew his conclusions about perfection

From many Biblical references,

Including our passage from 1st John today.

Perfection is the absence of fear,

The flood of love, and

Abiding in God.

"This it is

to be a perfect man,"²

he wrote in the early 1700's,

"to be 'sanctified throughout;'

even 'to have a heart

so all-flaming with the love of God,'

... 'as continually to offer up every thought, word, and work,

as a spiritual sacrifice,

acceptable to God through Christ.'

In every thought of our hearts,

in every word of our tongues,

in every work of our hands,

² A PLAIN ACCOUNT OF CHRISTIAN PERFECTION, as believed and taught by the Reverend Mr. John Wesley, from the year 1725, to the year 1777, in The Works of John Wesley (1872 ed. by Thomas Jackson), vol. 11, pp. 383-385 (Baker Book House edition, 1996).

to 'show forth his praise,
who hath called us out of darkness into his marvellous light.'
O that both we,
and all who seek the Lord Jesus in sincerity,
may thus 'be made perfect in one!'"

It is easy to love when love is reciprocated.
It is much more difficult when it isn't.
The example of perfect love was set for us
On the cross at Calvary,
Bought and paid for by the love of Jesus Christ;
Love for you, and love for me.
Some of us try to reciprocate Christ's love,
Others turn away.
Christ loves, just the same.
Growing in Christian perfection
Is all about
Following the example of the cross,
creating within
A heart all-inflaming with the love of God,
Where fear is overcome and cast out,
Where God is invited to dwell within
And allowed to become the source of our unlimited love.

Dearly beloved,
What is it that you fear?
Amen.