

# “12 Confessions of Love”

1 John 4:7-21

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## 1 John 4:7-21

<sup>7</sup>Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. <sup>8</sup>Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. <sup>9</sup>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. <sup>10</sup>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. <sup>11</sup>Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. <sup>12</sup>No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.

<sup>13</sup>By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit. <sup>14</sup>And we have seen and do testify that the Father has sent his Son as the Savior of the world. <sup>15</sup>God abides in those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God, and they abide in God. <sup>16</sup>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. <sup>17</sup>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. <sup>18</sup>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. <sup>19</sup>We love because he first loved us. <sup>20</sup>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. <sup>21</sup>The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.

## Prayer.

It is fitting that the topic of love is prominent on this Mother’s day Sunday. A mother’s love can be rich and beneficial. It can work at many levels. The most perfect love of a mother is nurturing and life sustaining, while, at the same time, it can also be the same love that sets limits, does what’s best – not what’s popular, and, in time, nudges the chicks out of the nest.

The Epistle lesson for this Sunday, from the letter of First John, is a beautiful, multipoint confessional on the nature of love, written by a first century disciple of Jesus Christ. This is a laser fine systematic of thoughts and beliefs about God’s nature and our relationship with God. In a very clear, efficient, concise manor, the Elder, the Epistle author of this text, comes to a place that has taken me three years of seminary and a life time of experience to begin to define in my own journey of faith.

While the focus is love, this is anything but a love-fest. The love that is described this morning comes with an implication that we can’t be passive listeners. It is implied that we are prompted to respond. Delving deep into this Epistle implies that we will have to make some sacrifices, some hard decisions about the direction we allow our faith to grow. For example, it is pretty difficult to conceptualize a condemning or punitive God if you are living and practicing faith in an environment constructed completely upon a foundation of love. As is true of many of life’s benefits, creating a faith foundation based on love involves trade-offs. Some issues will simply be easier to incorporate than others. Some issues will remain as inconsistencies that we just learn to live with.

Another observation I would make about our passage for today is that there isn’t anything cheep or free here. Love in its every form implies responsibility, something that often makes my more liberal colleagues and friends

bristle (not that I am a conservative prude). Love may be able to move mighty mountains, as the apostle Paul observes, but I'm here to tell you that love is the motivation that puts you in the seat of the bulldozer.

I've identified twelve points from our Epistle about the nature of love and how it affects our relationship with God and with each other. I won't labor each; rather, I think of myself more as a waitress delivering what the short-order cook is serving up.

### **1. God is love.**

This is what God is made of. This is what motivates God. This is what gives power to God. Love and God are not mutually interchangeable, however. That is, not all love is God. For example, it would be hard to defend the one who states "I love to drink and smoke and chase women." The fact remains that all of God, and everything about Him, is love.

As we look back over the testaments of salvation history, of how God created, made covenant, gave laws, provided prophetic guidance, sent His Son, and gives us the presence of His Spirit ... how much more obvious can it be? That God is love, and it is made evident in the daily interactions with humankind. It has been this way for generations, and we can expect that it will be this way for generations to come.

### **2. Everyone who loves is born of God.**

This love comes to us in our genes. It is imprinted upon us with the cool waters of baptism. The source of love is our Heavenly Father. When our Lord assembles our genetic code, the love of a benevolent God is programmed right into the nature and character of each new being. We may not be able to prove this with double blind studies, but observationally, this is affirmed with each successive generation.

Love comes from somewhere. It may take us a while to put two and two together. And when we do, the evidence always leads back to a loving God.

### **3. Everyone who loves knows God.**

Inherit with love comes knowledge; it isn't knowledge that is taught or learned though experience. It can be recognized or denied, but it doesn't change the fact of its presence. This knowledge is the roadmap that leads us back to God. It is as if God issues a bare bones instruction manual when we are born. It has only the most basic, rudimentary information. It is simply a schematic that connects love and God together. When we follow that connection, it always leads back to God. It isn't much. But it is enough to get us started on a journey of faith, and each of us are given a lifetime to fill in the details.

### **4. We have life through the Son of God.**

What hope was there before Jesus? You follow the Laws of God, faithfully live a life defined by the Covenant of Abraham, ... then what? Even God recognized that blessings were all well and good, but they wouldn't sustain you beyond the grave. It is the loving nature of God that recognized a need to remain in communion with creation beyond death. God's way was to choose to send us Jesus, and with him comes new life, abundant life, eternal life.

### **5. God loved us first.**

This may appear to be a little like the chicken and egg dilemma. But it is not. It is what John Wesley coined "prevenient grace." In modern English, the phrase *preceding grace* would have a similar meaning.<sup>1</sup>

Our United Methodist *Book of Discipline (2004)* defines *prevenient grace* as, "...the divine love that surrounds all humanity and precedes any and all of our conscious impulses. This grace prompts our first wish to please God, our first glimmer of understanding concerning God's will, and our 'first slight transient conviction' of having sinned

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1 See [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prevenient\\_Grace](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prevenient_Grace)

against God. God's grace also awakens in us an earnest longing for deliverance from sin and death and moves us toward repentance and faith."

#### **6. God's love overcomes our sins.**

There is no place where you can go to escape the love and forgiveness of God. There is no crime so heinous that puts you beyond God's reach. There is no sin that can prevent your return to our patient Heavenly Father. I don't care what gutter you've slept in, there is nothing that can separate anyone from the love of God, as Paul also observes.

This may appear to be morally offensive to those of us who pride ourselves on a lifetime of faithful living, like that elder brother who remained working the field while his prodigal sibling went partying across the countryside. But we are told quite pointedly that the nature of God's grace is not ours to dole out or to withhold. God's grace is God's prerogative, and God's prerogative alone.

#### **7. Because God loves us, we should love others.**

What is so difficult to understand about this? Why should we be miserly with something that is so incredibly abundant in our own lives?

Yet, consider how often we are guilty of being grumpy, of withholding love from others. Consider how easy it is to withhold love driven generosity in the name of prudence, wisdom or conservatism? Or worse yet, in the name of wealth, selfishness, or self-absorption?

#### **8. If we love, God lives in us.**

We are the Body of Christ. When we love, we become the Holy Spirit's manifestation in the world today. We literally become the hands, the eyes, the mouth, the mind, and the heart of Jesus. But only when we love. When we fail to love, the body crumbles, disintegrates, ceases to be. The biggest endowment in the world will keep the lights on and the furnace running for years after a congregation ceases to love and fades into darkness.

The key, however, is love. It is so simple, but so easy to overlook. It is easy to become misled or misguided by the latest program, brightest idea, or most persuasive motivational preacher. Churches fail all the time because they lose their love – love for one another, love for their neighbors, love for the Lord our God. Love is to the Body of Christ, as oxygen is to the body of the being.

#### **9. God's love is perfected in us.**

Don't underestimate yourselves. The love you have is perfect. It needs no improvement. It is perfect in every way shape and form. We could choose to neglect it and allow it to die on the vine. But the faithful disciple of Jesus takes this love of God and runs with it. We are called to take this love of God and to use it to change the universe – one person at a time.

The strategy outlined by the Gospel author is to start small and local – start with loving yourself and those close to you. But don't stop there! Love your neighbors as yourselves. Love your enemies and those who persecute you. Love the Lord, the source of life and love, with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength.

Because God's love is perfect in every way, we don't need to be concerned about the consequences. Simply love. Leave the rest up to God.

#### **10. God loves us so much He uses His Spirit to guide us.**

This is the Pentecost message that is coming in just a few weeks. We are left alone, in a vacuum. We are shown the path of righteousness and faithful living. The problem comes when we make the attempt to exert our own will, to get our own way.

Our life isn't about what we can accomplish. It is about what God can accomplish working through us. Now there is a different way of viewing things. When we can give up our strong minded, stubborn will and turn our life over to God, the Holy Spirit comes and dwells within. It becomes the captain and leads us gently and safely where we need to go.

### **11. There is no fear in love.**

Here is one for church authorities and the clergy. Fear has been used as a motivating factor for so many millennia that we just assume that it is a natural part of the environment. You've heard it before: baptize your child so if it dies it doesn't go to hell. Accept Jesus as your Lord and Savior, or face eternal damnation. Give ten percent to the coffers of the church or you can't be buried in the church's cemetery ... and you'll go straight to hell.

Yet, our Epistle author tells us that there is no place for fear in the kingdom of God. Hell is gone; it exists only where it is created in the hearts of men. Hell has no place with God. It doesn't exist as a polar opposite to heaven. It only exists because we have created it, and we are reluctant to let it go. It is high time for fear, hell, and damnation to depart from the Church and its teaching. It is a lousy motivator, and an ineffective expression of our loving God.

### **12. There is no hatred in love.**

Hatred is the polar opposite to love. By definition, there can be no hatred where there is love. To love is to love all things good. To love is to not give attention to those things that are bad. It doesn't mean that we hate them – we don't hate sin and immorality; we just don't have any place for them in our lives when our whole life is given over to a life of love.

This should be so obvious, but hatred, like fear, has been such a large part of our world that we think that it has its place. It doesn't. We see those who hate people of different beliefs, skin color, culture, or sexual orientation and we create in our own minds justification for hatred. Hatred, even hatred of sin, drives injustice, empowers violence, and energizes oppression. We say we hate the sin but love the sinner.

Oh, please. Love has no time for hatred. Love has no place for judgment. Love has no tolerance for injustice, violence, or discrimination. Perfect love only has concern for being a conduit for God's love to flow into our broken world.

Dearly beloved, love one another. Love your neighbors. Love your enemies. Love the Lord your God. Love, because this is our Lord's desire for you and your life.

The Word of the Lord, as it has come to me this Mother's day. Amen.