

BORN OF LOVE

I John 4:7-21

During the days of the civil right struggle Martin Luther King spoke often of love. He said things like, "At the center of non-violence stands the principle of love." "Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that." I friend of mine who was very active in various racial and social justice causes often preached on love as being at the heart of Christian life and the fundamental reason for Christian social concern.

He told me of the time he got up to preach on the subject of love and someone in the congregation stood up and yelled, "I hate love!" It might seem like a stupid thing to say, but being told to love our enemies, being told to do good to those who hate us is not something we like or are supposed to like. Yet for Christians it is not a choice or a recommendation. That is why Jesus said, "This commandment I give you to love one another." To fail to love one another is to reject a gift from God because God gave us love before anything.

Love is a most overused and misused word. We might say, "I love to play golf," when what we really mean is it is my favorite form of recreation. We might say, "I loved the movie," when what we really mean is I found it entertaining. We might say, "I loved the restaurant," when what we really mean is that the meal was delicious. Then there is the great line from a popular 1970's song by the Doors: "Hello, I love you, won't you tell me your name." What is really meant is best left unsaid. Anytime anyone uses the word "love" in relationship to an inanimate object or simply in reference to something giving them pleasure, it falls short of being the self-giving love of Christ.

It is no easy thing to preach for 15 to 20 minutes on such an overused and misused word. In the Guinness Book of World Records there is listed the shortest sermon ever preached. It was given by Reverend John Albrecht, an Episcopal priest in Michigan. He stood in his pulpit to preach, paused, and said "Love!" He then sat down. Some of Albrecht's members said it was the best sermon he ever preached, which is one reason I will not follow his lead. But it does raise the question: after we say "love" how can we ever describe what it is?

It is like what happened in April of 1995 when the newscaster on the main evening news show in New Delhi, India made a startling announcement: “The weather has been canceled until further notice. It is all got too complicated to explain and we keep getting it wrong anyway.” Explaining the love of God is a bit like that. I often find the best weather prediction I get is the 30 seconds it takes me each morning to step outside and get the paper. It is better to just experience the love of God than to have it explained.

We only know love because we were first loved. We were first born of love. God’s love was first revealed to us. We are only able to love others because we were first loved. Love is the very nature of our God and the truest expression of our faith. We do not create love any more than we can create sunlight or the wind.

OK, perhaps some of us preachers are responsible for some of the wind, and some of us get hot under the collar. The point is we do not create energy. We harness energy. We release energy. We use energy. But we do not create energy. We do not create love. We express love. We act with love only because the love of God was first placed within us.

Certainly one of the greatest examples of one who first loved us is the one celebrated today, the love of mothers. We know that culturally Father’s Day is not nearly such a big day as Mother’s Day, but then there are a lot of mother-in-law jokes but no father-in-law jokes so it all evens out.

Let me share with you a listing I got this past week of the signs of a frustrated mother. Here are a few:

- Your children tell you that you said “yes” and you don’t even remember the question.
- Your children know how to read computer codes but can’t operate a new vacuum cleaner.
- You mistakenly tell the kids it’s “sanity” time when you meant to say “bed” time.
- The laundry seems to have taken on an evil nature and you begin to feel that it’s out to get you.
- You go to sleep with “I’m bored” still ringing in your ears.
- The hand that rocks the cradle usually is attached to someone who isn’t getting enough sleep.

- But just remember that diaper spelled backward is repaid.
The point is that the best of parenting is loving and giving in spite of it all.

Dr. Bernie Siegel is a physician best known as the author of the book, *Love, Miracles and Medicine*. In the introduction to this book, Dr. Siegel wrote: “Psychologists have shown that the effects of love on the body can be measured: An unloved infant will have retarded bone growth and may even die; a stroked infant grows faster. The effects of peace of mind are measurable too...Love and peace of mind do protect us...they allow us to overcome the problems that life hands us.

There are those who do not believe that love is a gift from God because they simply do not believe in God. It seems that amongst some there is a resurgence in atheism. What atheist authors say is shocking to some, it gets media attention and sells books which makes them money and the same atheists can later in life claim to have become believers and sell a whole bunch of books to a new group of people. Those writing books claiming there is no God don't seem like a terribly happy group and if they honestly believe there is no God I am not sure why they feel the need to prove what they do not believe exists.

Whenever I hear people saying they do not believe in God I always want to know what is the god in which they do not believe? We do know that one of the reasons the world is in political turmoil and wars are being fought in many places in the world is because people believe in a vengeful, violent, angry god. They believe in a god who seeks to destroy enemies. They believe in an intolerant and unforgiving god. They believe in a national god who favors their nation over every other nation. We know many Muslims believe in this kind of god as do many Hindus and the Buddhists and Jews. And unfortunately many Christians believe in an unforgiving, vengeful, violent god. So if you tell me you do not believe in that god neither do I.

We believe that the true nature of God was revealed in Jesus of Nazareth. This is the God of love and mercy and kindness. It is a God revealed also to the Jews. God's love and mercy and justice are proclaimed all throughout Jewish scriptures. There is a loving God revealed also to Buddhists and to Hindus. There is a loving God revealed to Muslims. But when people in the name of their faith – even in the name of Jesus – act in hatred then we can agree it is not the god in which we believe. When we hear the lesson of the morning that God is love that is the God in which we believe.

Love is the essential nature of God. Love is the most visible evidence of God. We know people often turn to nature and say that the beauty of sky and sea, lake and tree, flowers and meadows, sea shores and soaring mountains are evidence of God, and they are. But they are fundamentally evidence of something which happened long ago.

Perhaps that is why some think of God as being like a watchmaker who created, set things running, then left to be seen no more. That is why we need to understand that the essence of God is the love that exists now, in this Christian fellowship, the love in the hearts of mothers and fathers. Love is the essential nature of God and it is the organizing principle of our life together today and every day.

It is love which begets love and love which drives out fear. The proclamation that perfect love casts out fear was written to those who turn from the God who first loved us and choose instead to embrace fear and alienation. Jonathan Swift, the 18th-century author of *Gulliver's Travels*, is said to have commented: "We have just enough religion to make us hate one another, but not enough to make us love one another."

You recall that President Franklin Roosevelt said, "We have nothing to fear but fear itself." Yet there are also today many voices telling us to be afraid. Fear is the major theme of many TV shows and movies and political campaigns. Fear sells. The more filled with fear one is, the more difficult it is to relax into God's loving arms.

Many of us wake up fearful, go through each day fearful, and struggle at night to get rest while still tormented with fear. This passage declares that the one true way to cast out our fears is to embrace the love of God which allows us to love of neighbors and even our enemies.

Love is the antidote for fear. A great church leader of an earlier day, Nicolas Berdyaev observed that, "Fear is never a good counselor." Martin Luther, when he was under siege by civil and church authorities during the Protestant Reformation, was asked by a friend, "Brother Martin, where will you be when church, princes and people turn against you? Where will you be then?" Luther replied, "Why, then, as now, in the hands of Almighty God." God's love casts out our fears.

Lucy stood with her arms folded and a resolute expression on her face, while Charlie Brown pleaded with her. “Lucy,” he said, “you must be more loving. The world needs love. Make this world a better place, Lucy, by loving someone else.” At that Lucy whirled around angrily and Charlie flipped over backwards. “Look, you blockhead,” Lucy screamed. “The world I love. It’s people I can’t stand!” This is where the challenge lies not to love in principle but to love those right in front of us including mom.

There is a true story of a woman in South Carolina who had a deeply scarred face. Her young daughter, as she was growing up, was embarrassed to be seen in public with her mother. One day, the aunt, the mother’s sister, came to visit. She noticed how the daughter acted around her mother. The aunt pulled her niece aside and told her something she had not known.

When the girl was three years old, there was a horrible fire in her home. The fireman could not get there in time. The little girl was in the back of the house trapped in her room. Because of love for her daughter the mother risked her own life to rescue her daughter and pulled her out of the fire. The flames burned the mother’s face so badly that she was left with ugly scars.

From that time on, whenever the girl heard people ridicule her mother because of her looks, she would go to them with a smile on her face and with grateful pride say, “Every time I look at my mother’s face, I see how much she loves me.” Love casts out fear and embarrassment. Love accepts scars on the face and on the soul. Love overcomes a host of wrongs that beset every family.

I want to close with the words of St. Francis de Sales, “The measure of our love is to love without measure.” May God give us Grace to do so.

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The Federated Church of Hyannis

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