

THE BOOK OF I JOHN

4. God Is Love

I John 4:7-21

PENTECOST 15

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In his autobiography, American writer and humorist, Mark

Twain wrote:

“Repetition is a mighty power in the domain of humor.

**If frequently used, nearly any precisely worded and
unchanged formula will eventually compel laughter,
if it be gravely and earnestly repeated at intervals,
five or six times.”**

Twain knew from experience the truth of his claim.

On his first lecture tour of the United States, he began **“with a
scheme so daring in nature,”** as he put it, that he wondered
how he **“ever had the courage to carry it through.”**

He began his lecture in a level, colorless, monotone voice by
telling a short story of no interest, and certainly no humor.

His first telling was met with dead silence, as he anticipated.

Fifteen hundred people sat before him and stared, with facial
expressions exhibiting sorrow, insult, resentment, and pity.

Twain tried to look embarrassed.

He took a long pause.

He stood fumbling his hands, trying to appeal to his audience for
sympathy.

Then he began again.

He told the same story in the same way.

Once more he was greeted with looks of confusion and indignation.

Twain paused, and started up again.

He told the same story in the same way for the third time.

But this time, the reaction was quite different.

“All of a sudden,” he recalls, **“the front row recognized (the joke of**

it), and broke into a laugh.”

It spread throughout the auditorium until he said, **“the laughter was universal and as thunderously noisy as a tempest.”**

The art of repetition, as Mark Twain proved, can be used to enlighten riotous laughter.

The art of repetition can also be applied for other purposes.

In I John 4:7-21, our final passage in this four-part sermon series, repetition provokes a rather sober reflection on the theme of love.

The word, *love*, including the verb forms, *loves*, *loved*, and the address, *beloved*, is repeated 27 times, averaging nearly two occurrences per verse.

To put that into perspective, *love* is addressed here more than in the four Gospels combined.

With Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians, a close second, this portion of I John is the most highly concentrated section on the theme of *love* in the whole scripture.

Of all the Biblical writers, John loves to talk about *love*.

That is why some ancient Christian writers called him *“the doctor of love,”* and *“the theologian of love.”*

In a book I recently received and began reading on the Methodism’s founder, John Wesley, the author cited I John as Wesley’s favorite book in the Bible.

In fact, Wesley, himself, has been thought of as the theologian of I John.

I once read that we Lutherans tend to treat Galatians as the key book for interpreting the Bible.

Galatians is stark, forceful, incisive, penetrating, and confrontational, much like Paul and Luther were.

Luther expressed his fondness of the book by saying, **“It is my wife.”**

Reformed Church theologians tend to gravitate to Ephesians, a book that presupposes the truth of both Galatians and the other Protestant favorite, Romans, in that we are saved by grace through faith.

John Wesley believed that, by the end of his life, the Apostle, John had reached a level of spiritual maturity unparalleled not only among the apostles, but perhaps also in the history of the human race.

The letter of I John, which Wesley described as a tract, rather than an

epistle, believing also that John wrote it for those he was with, rather those far away, is compositionally repetitive, tending to circle back to the same few points, with love being one of them. Wesley is a good guide to reading I John, because he understands how the message of the letter is supposed to work in a believer's life. In Wesley's broad approach to the New Testament, Paul was the Apostle of Faith, and John, the Apostle of Love.

Every New Testament letter or epistle concludes with a section of application.

In this case, it begins with today's passage.

Like the other writers, John wants to show his readers that Christianity is meant to be practiced.

John begins this passage by urging believers to love one another:

“Beloved, let us love one another” (v. 7).

Such love involves cherishing and valuing one another, doing good to each other as God commands, and seeking the best welfare of each other, putting their best interests above our own.

All of this and much more is revealed at the cross, where Christ displayed voluntary, self-sacrificial, enduring, and fruitful love that defies our understanding.

That is why John goes on to say,

“Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another” (v. 11).

John is urging his readers to show the kind of love in our relationships with one another that indicates that we are truly God's forgiven and loved children.

He is telling us that if we do not love our brothers and sisters in Christ, we may be charged with being religious frauds.

John says in verse eight:

“Whoever does not love, does not know God, for God is love.”

Love is not something God DOES, it is what God IS, according to John. In His eternal essence and being and nature, God is LOVE.

The second reason that we should love one another, John says, is that God first loved us.

In verses nine through ten we read:

“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.”

Think of that word, ‘SO.’

John, here, is echoing his own Gospel.

“God so loved the world.”

Herein lies love for John.

At our best and highest, at our finest and purest, we are still sinners deserving God’s wrathful judgment.

But God loved us.

And what God has done for us is the primary incentive for us to love one another.

“God loves us, not after we have reformed our lives and made ourselves better, but, as Paul says to the Romans, ‘while we were yet sinners’” (5:6).

John’s confession that God is love is one of the distinctive truths of Christian life.

The Triune God, the Living God, the God revealed in the Scriptures, especially the God incarnated in the Person of Jesus Christ, is LOVE.

Love is God’s deepest inner being.

However, we need to be careful here.

Saying that God is love is not quite the same as saying love is God.

It is certainly not the same as saying that everything we call love is God or of God.

We can’t draw from this the conclusion that every feeling, desire, or passion is of or from God.

Our affections and loves are not selfless and pure.

We can “love” in all kinds of sinful and perverted ways.

Every act of genuine love comes from God, but not everything we want to call love comes from God.

For John, this eternal and essential love of God is manifested, or displayed in God’s actions, specifically in the fact that God

the Father sent the Son to give us life.

John writes this to dispel and discredit the false teaching that is circulating among the churches he knows and loves — the heresy that Jesus is not of the flesh; that He is a spiritual being masquerading in human form, like some Greek god or goddess. John clearly has the image of Jesus, the man, in view before him as he writes.

John was a disciple, himself, of Jesus, who heard His teachings, who ate at His table, who saw His loving acts of healing and forgiveness, and who touched His resurrected body. For him, God's love is displayed in the whole life and ministry of Jesus.

John highlights the priority of God's love over our love for Him. Love is not defined or initiated by our act of loving God, but rather by His loving us.

As John says also in our text, we love Him in response to His prior love in us.

God's love sets the pattern for our love, and that means that we are called to give ourselves for one another, as God gave Himself for us.

This gives us a specific idea of what love looks like: It looks like Jesus.

Beloved people of God gathered here this day,

if you want to really know what God is like, look at the Gospel.

If you have seen Jesus with the eyes of faith, if you have seen Him in a manger, seen Him tempted in the wilderness, seen Him passionately calling out the Pharisees who oppress His people, seen Him freely offering Himself on the cross, seen Him powerfully rising again from the dead — when you have seen all of these acts, you have seen the God who is **LOVE**.

If you want to really see the God of Love, love one another as Jesus has loved you.

Talk about being repetitious:

I have used the word, **love**, sixty-one times in this message alone.

AMEN