

The Source of Love

I John 3:16-17; 4:7-8

Lake Shore Baptist Church, Waco, Texas

December 20, 2020

Today is the fourth and final Sunday of Advent. On previous Sundays we have examined and celebrated hope, peace and joy. Today the theme is love.

You may think that preachers love to preach about love. I mean, that's the heart of the matter, isn't? That's what the Gospel is all about. I'll tell you a secret: a lot of us preachers don't love to preach about love. In fact, some of us dread it. Because -- how can you preach about love without sounding like you're writing text for Hallmark cards? Or lyrics for sappy sixties songs?

"All you need is love" – wah,wah,wahwhawha – that was the horn section. The arrangement of that Beatle hit was amazing, I'll grant that. But the lyrics took about a minute to write. Sing "All you need is love" 12 times, then in a clever songwriting move rearrange the words a bit and sing "Love is all you need" 35 times. Yes, I counted. I actually counted. We were quarantined . . .

Or, "What the world needs now is love, sweet love." A little back story. When that song was offered to Dionne Warwick, who ultimately recorded it but only after Jackie Deshannon made it a hit, she turned it down. She said it was "too preachy." Here I am associating sappy sentimentality with certain sixties music, and Dionne Warwick associates sappy sixties love songs with preaching! Which, in an insulting way, sort of makes my point.

When biblically literate Christians think about love passages in the Bible, they likely think of I Corinthians 13. We even call it the love chapter. And it is one of the great passages in the Bible. But I believe that the more fundamental text, theologically speaking, regarding love is I John 3-4, which hardly anyone reads. (It's in the back, just before II John.) I would go so far as to say that orthodox Christian theology hinges on those two chapters. If they're not true, nothing else is. I have isolated a few verses from those chapters; I encourage you to read the chapters in their entirety.

The author of I John makes the astonishing claim that the essential nature of God is love. You aren't astonished, are you? What could more be theologically mundane than "God is love"? It is one of the first Bible verses we learned as children, along with, "Be ye kind one to another," which was taught to children as a means of crowd control.

We say "God is love" casually, even unthinkingly. It doesn't shock us or challenge us. The reason it doesn't shock or challenge us is because we say it in a personal, relational context – God loves us, God loves all humankind, God loves me.

But pull back and think about what "God is love" means in the largest of all settings. About 20 years ago I bought a book of images of the universe as seen through the Hubble Space Telescope. I was and am astounded by the breathtaking beauty of the

images of spiral galaxies, ringed-spiral galaxies, nebulae. I was and am astounded even more by the numbers. For example, one spiral galaxy – NCC 4603 -- is said to be over 100 million light years away. At 6 trillion miles per light year, that is, well, I don't know what to call it, but it is 6 followed by 20 zeroes. I think. That's how far away it is. It might as well be a hundred zeroes, because my brain starts sending error messages after five or six zeroes.

My point is that when we talk about creation, that's what we're talking about. All those zeroes. We aren't talking just about lilies in a field, though we are talking about that. We're talking about the creation that boggled the mind of the psalmist.

*When I consider your heavens,
the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars,
which you have set in place,
what is mankind that you are mindful of them,
human beings that you care for them? (Psalm 8:3-4)*

The author of our text claims that the essential quality of the Creator -- essential from the creature's point of view -- is love. That is an astonishing claim. God is not an impersonal force like electricity or gravity, indifferent to the trials and tribulations of mere mortals, unbothered by pandemics or injustice. God is love.

But the author goes further. *The writer claims that because God, who is the very definition of what is real, is love, God is the source of all love.* There is no other source of love in the universe. *"Love is from God,"* the writer says. However it is expressed, by whomever it is expressed, love has its source in God.

A lot of people, -- a lot of Christians -- would find that a radical and controversial idea. That is why, if you ever have occasion to tell someone about it, you should quickly add, "It's in the Bible." The reason some people would find that idea radical and threatening is because it calls into question "Christian love."

Would someone please explain "Christian love" to me? All my life I have heard about "Christian love." Reach out in Christian love. Do this in Christian love. If it isn't "Christian love," it isn't real love, or it isn't love of the highest order. It is a lesser form of love.

"Christian love" must be a thing because you can search for it on-line. One site claims that "Christian love" is selfless; another says that it is sacrificial. I hope that the love Christians express is selfless and sacrificial, but does that distinguish it from, say, Jewish love? Or Muslim love? Or atheist love?

In I Corinthians 13 Paul does not say "Christian love is patient. Christian love is kind. Christian love is not envious or boastful or arrogant." He says, "Love is patient and kind, and not envious or boastful or arrogant." There is no such thing as "Christian

love.” Love is love. (Hey, that could a song. It may be already.) There is only love, which has its origin in God. It’s in the Bible.

In case the reader did not get the point, the author spells it out: “*Everyone who loves is born of God and knows God.*” Everyone? Even those people? Well, if love has its source, its lone source, in God, then, yes, everyone, even those people.

Nothing shows the human connection with God – call it the image of God if you like – more clearly than our capacity to love.

Downtown Winston-Salem, where we live, is the highest elevation in the city. Regardless which direction you go when you leave downtown, you go downhill. A couple of months ago, as I left downtown, I caught a glimpse of the city. It was dusk, and the streetlights were coming on. The thought crossed my mind: there is likely as much love in that house or that one or any or all of them as there is in mine. I believe that’s true.

Multiply that neighborhood many times so that you’re thinking about all the houses and apartments in a city of a quarter of a million people. And many more times, until you’re imagining all the houses and apartments in North Carolina. And then the United States. And then the world – from mansions on the Riviera to favelas in South America. It is mind-boggling to imagine love on that scale – as mind-boggling as trying to imagine 6 followed by 20 zeroes – but that is the scope of the human potential for love. That is the reality of love in the world.

Now, I’m not naïve. I’m a lot closer to cynicism than to naivete, if those are opposite ends of the spectrum. I know that while it is true that nothing shows the human connection with God more clearly than our capacity to love, it is also true that nothing shows the human disconnection from God than the refusal to love and the all-too-familiar effort to circumscribe and limit love to one’s kin and friends, one’s country, one’s cause, one’s ethnicity or race, to people like us.

Nonetheless, in this holy season it is incumbent on us to recognize and celebrate love whenever, wherever, in whomever we find it. Because love is from God. And everyone who loves is born of God. Everyone.

Love is love. Set it to music. I think it will sell. Amen.