

## **Love Leaves No One Behind** Sunday, 3/14/21

Do you have a favorite Gospel? You really should, because we have four Gospels, and they're all full of accounts describing the life and teachings of Jesus. The great thing about the four Gospels is that they're all unique. If you're into tracing the genealogy of Jesus and the citation of Old Testament Scriptures, then Matthew's the Gospel for you. If you're into details and geography, you might like Luke. If you're more of Reader's Digest or comic book reader, then definitely Mark is the Gospel for you. And if you love poetic and mystical writing, then none of the Gospels compare with John.

Of the four Gospel writers, our Bible includes additional writings from two of them. Acts is Luke's sequel to his Gospel, and John left us three letters, the first from which we heard earlier. John is sometimes called the "Love Gospel" because love is mentioned more often in John than in all the three other Gospels combined. Not surprisingly, it's also a common topic in John's first letter. Poetic language and the subject of love go well together, and so our reading from 1John 4 is an especially beautiful, if somewhat fuzzy, essay on God's love for us, our love for each other, and our love for God.

My brain is wired a little differently than John's, so while I can hear the beauty in his writing, I sometimes have to sketch out a word picture so that I can really understand what he's trying to say. It's deceptively simple sounding, but it's so deep with meaning.

Here's my best shot at a summary of those passages from 1John 4. God's very nature is love, of which his most defining act was his sending of Jesus to save us from our sin. Because of God's love given to us, especially because of Jesus, we ought to love others. When we love others, we make more room for God's love in our lives, bring that love to its full expression in the world, and perfect our ability to love. When we love in this way, we demonstrate not only that we really know God, but that we are children of God. Our love for others demonstrates our love for God and leaves no room for fear of God's judgment of us. It's simply impossible to love God without also loving God's people, so if we have a problem loving other people, that means we have a problem with loving God. But as we more fully surrender to the way of Jesus, the love of God sets up an amazing cycle of love, with God's love multiplying our love of others and our love of God.

John's words are so beautiful, but we're meant to do so much more than just

appreciate John's poetry. John wrote that we might grow in our devotion to walking the way of love. And in order to do that, we need to wrestle with the implications of his words.

It shouldn't take too much deep reflection for any of us to recall an instance of us being unloving. If you're a parent, you might have raised your voice with a child. If you're married, you've chosen at some point to serve yourself instead of your spouse. In the community in which you live, and in your specific neighborhood, you've probably noticed someone who appears to be in distress and failed to offer a helping hand. As many people as you encounter in a day, whether in-person or remotely, there are opportunities to offer or withhold love.

What's more, there's a holy mandate to love not just as individual Christians, but also as the Church as a whole, the Body of Christ. I think that's the one that perhaps is even harder to wrap our minds around, because we're so used to thinking in terms of individual rights and responsibilities. As Bishop Curry writes, "how easy it is for us as individuals to be moral personally, and at the same time immoral as part of the society, the class, the race, the religion. When the mob does evil, we blame it on the mob, and ignore that we are complicit when we are passive."<sup>1</sup>

God's view is, unsurprisingly, so much larger than ours, with God's vision for salvation extending to all who will choose to receive it. And that's the context of this next passage from the Prophet Isaiah, which is an indictment of the hypocrisy of not just individuals but of the entire collective of God-worshippers. These are hard words to hear, and they're hardly the end of the story, but let's listen to them with honest and open hearts in the spirit of a Lenten self-examination. I'm reading from the first chapter, briefly from the second verse and then moving to verse eleven, in the New Living Translation.

**{Read Isaiah 1:2a, 11-17 NLT}**

Here's a scene from a church that's been repeated millions of times in millions of church buildings. It could easily be our church under more normal circumstances. To get a better sense of what Isaiah has written, let's try to contextualize his message to one of our church services. We don't sacrifice animals on the altar, but we do engage in our share of

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<sup>1</sup> Bishop Michael Curry. *Love Is the Way*, p. 143. Avery (2020).

ritual, don't we? We stand up, we sit down. We fold our hands, we close our eyes. We light candles, we bring offerings. We sing praises to God, and we confess our sin. On Palm Sunday we parade around the sanctuary waving palm branches. We observe special seasons, like Advent and Lent. Every Sunday we pray the Lord's Prayer together, as well as lifting up other prayers.

What would it be like for us if Isaiah were to stand up in worship and say something like this to our entire church on behalf of God: What makes you think I want your offerings and your ceremonies? Who asked you to play dress-up in church and light candles? Why do you bother to mark the season of Lent? I hate it! Your praise songs? It would be far better if you remained silent. Your prayers? I'm not listening to you. Why not? Because your hands are covered with the blood of innocent victims. Don't bother worshipping me in the sanctuary until you do the worship that really pleases me. Learn to do good for others. Seek justice for others. Help the oppressed. Defend the cause of the homeless. Fight for the rights of the powerless! The church exists to serve others, not yourself!

Bishop Curry quotes a former Archbishop, William Temple, as saying "the church is the only society that doesn't exist for the good of its members."<sup>2</sup> Let me say that one more time, because I believe that this is fundamentally true at the core of the church's mission. The church ... doesn't exist for the good of its members. And yet, as Bishop Curry observes, "It's all too easy for faith communities to drift slowly toward existing primarily for the good of their membership."<sup>3</sup> What do churches like that look like? One indication is that people become more focused on fighting about their preferred content and format of worship and less concerned about reaching others outside of the sanctuary. In fact, the prevalence of preference-based arguments regarding how we do church is a strong indicator of a wayward spirit, because worship and the church itself was always intended to be offered in the service of God rather than in service to the congregation. Since that's true, wouldn't it be refreshingly honest to admit that most Christian churches in America are in crisis, something that's been apparent for at least the last 70 years? What are we to do about it?

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid, p. 145.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, p. 148

I suspect that what our church needs is the same thing that all churches need: The all-consuming fire of God's love. In the words of Bishop Curry, we need "a reawakening toward the community outside our walls, ... leading to a re-awakening of the reality of God within and without... This is hard and necessary work, for all of us. It's easy to contribute money and time to "do good" and help others. It is for tougher to maintain a humble and dedicated relationship with God and with others, especially others who are not like you."<sup>4</sup>

I'm not suggesting that our current and past ministries like our support of the Buffalo Food Shelf aren't good and necessary ministries. Instead, what I'm saying is that we need a radical transformation of our hearts and a reclaiming of our original mission. We need to wake up and remember that we are the Body of Christ and let our concern for the least, the lost, and the left-out become a more central part of who we are and everything we do and say; how we make our decisions and where we invest our passions and energy, not just as individuals, but as the church. Bible commentator F.F. Bruce said of the Early Church, their conception of what love meant involved "a consuming passion for the well-being of others, and this love has its wellspring in God."<sup>5</sup> What a beautiful way to describe love, a consuming passion for the well-being of others. What would we look like as a church if we truly embraced the way of love in that way? Perhaps that's what Jesus meant when he said, "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."<sup>6</sup>

Who are the people we're currently leaving behind as a church? Is it the people who don't have a car and can't get a ride to church? Is it the people who don't have a clean set of clothing and don't feel they'd fit in? Is it the people who didn't grow up in the church and don't know the right things to say and do? Is it the elderly and sick who can no longer leave their homes to attend in-person church functions? Is it people who have no internet access or who can't read English? I suspect it's those people and so many more. Has God placed a burden on your heart for someone in our community who's been left out? Who does your heart break for? As we continue to travel the way of love, and we look forward to continuing to reinvent church in our post-pandemic future, let's remember that we're here to serve

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid, p. 154.

<sup>5</sup> F.F. Bruce. *The Gospel and Epistles of John*, p. 107. Eerdmans (1983).

<sup>6</sup> John 13:35. New International Version (2011)

beyond the walls of our church building and the limits of our preferences to embrace a consuming passion for the well-being of others, especially others who aren't like us and haven't been included in the many blessings we've enjoyed in being the church. 2021 could be the year of a reawakening for BUMC. Who will we choose to serve?

Please take some time now to reflect on who your heart breaks for. What can we, as the church, do about it? If you like, please share a comment or a prayer.



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