

FIRST LESSON: Psalm 36: 5-11
SECOND LESSON: 1 John 4:7-21
May 2, 2021

“Perfect Love Drives Out Fear”

Sermon © Lisa C. Farrell

By now we should be getting the message of 1 John. It's all about love. God is love. It is impossible to know God and not have love. God showed God's love by sending God's one and only son. The word is *monogenes*. It literally means “one of a kind.” Jesus is unique. We are God's children, but not in the way that Jesus is God's son. There is only one Jesus. And God sent his one and only unique son to us in order that we might live through him. The life we have been given is eternal life in heaven, and a blessed life here and now where regardless of what happens, God is with us.

1 John says that God sent Jesus as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. But we're not very comfortable with the whole idea of sacrifice in our culture. It is foreign to us. What we have to remember is that every ancient religion of the time including Judaism employed sacrifice. It was not strange to them. Sacrifice was a central part of religion deeply rooted in the ancient world. Blood was generally required. An animal was sacrificed to either please or appease the god. But the word used here in 1 John can mean several different things. It can mean to regain God's favor by appeasing God's wrath. It can mean the removal of sin. And it can mean making amends for sin and repairing the spiritual damage so that our relationship with God is restored. This third meaning, that of making amends and repairing damage, probably resonates more with our understanding today. God always speaks in language people understand. But all we truly know is that Jesus lived and died and rose from the dead in order to reconcile us to God and heal us. Much as we try to explain it using human metaphors like courtrooms, the whys and hows are a mystery.

The author of 1 John goes to great lengths to describe how impossible it is for those who have no love in their hearts to know God. This made me very curious about the group of false teachers he was up against. I'm guessing they didn't consider love to be particularly important. For them it was probably all about knowledge and status. Perhaps they even claimed to be able to see God while in a transcendent state, which may be why 1 John says, “No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.”

There is no fear in love. 1 John says that perfect love drives out fear. Some translations say “casts out”. Basically, love picks fear up by the scuff of the neck and boots it out the door. Perfect love and fear do not co-exist well. But there is fear that is pathological, and fear that is a basic part of our survival. Fear is not always negative. People without fear can put themselves in dangerous situations. We **should** be afraid of falling off cliffs, explosions and volcanos. Fear is part of self-preservation. And even when we describe our

heroes as fearless, we know that that is not true. It is pushing through fear to save another person that is heroic, not a complete absence of fear. Fear that starts as a basic tool of survival can quickly evolve into more complex and less helpful forms, however. When fear becomes chronic and our days are filled with anxiety and worry, it can literally shorten our lives. This fear is not logical, because the things we are afraid of are beyond our control, and there is little point, practically speaking, in fearing things we have no control over. It will not help us avoid danger or handle a crisis better. But we're afraid anyway, and we can't seem to stop it.

- We are afraid of death.
- We are afraid of being left alone because everyone else has died or left us.
- We are afraid of pain.
- We are afraid of disability.
- We are afraid of being powerless.

These are primary fears. But because we are social beings living in an imperfect world we are also afraid of secondary things. I can be afraid of success—because of the pressure it might bring. If I succeed, people may expect me to keep succeeding. Maybe it's easier to not try? I can be afraid of failure. If I fail that might mean that I'm worthless. I can be afraid of crowds, or heights, or being stuck in an elevator. I can be afraid of dogs or cats or mice or snakes. I can be afraid of the dark. Don't bad things always happen in the movies when the lights go out? And I can be afraid of rejection, and afraid of punishment. It is this fear above all else that the author of 1 John seems to be addressing. It is the fear of God, a fear that many of us have even forgotten exists because we have turned God into a cross between Santa Claus and the Easter Bunny. 1 John is primarily speaking about not fearing the day of judgment, because perfect love casts out fear. We have nothing to fear because God loves us.

Love is the answer to all forms of fear. If we know in our hearts that we are completely and unconditionally loved by God we will not be afraid that God will abandon us, and we will not be afraid that God will reject us. The proof of this is that God loves us so much God sent God's one and only son! The love that is strong enough to drive out fear, however, is perfect love. But who could possibly have perfect love?

Fortunately, the way they understood perfect and the way we understand perfect are not the same. In Greek "perfect" means to be complete. We have a similar meaning when we use it as a verb and we "perfect" something. Perfect love is full-grown mature love. It has gone through all the stages of growing up and has arrived. We may not yet possess this type of mature or complete love but that doesn't mean we can't get there. Perfect love evicts terror and torment from our life, because we know we are in God's hands. We are no longer afraid that God will cast us out, no longer afraid that we will find ourselves alone.

Having firmly made his point about God's love for us, 1 John then turns one more time to our love for one another. The author is blunt. "Whoever claims to love God yet hates a brother or sister is a liar. For whoever does not love their brother and sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom

they have not seen.” The so-called “acid test” of our faith, then, is our willingness and ability to love one another. And this is where human beings fall down.

We have all been hurt by human relationships in offices, in schools and in neighborhoods. But when it happens in church there is a whole new level of pain, because church is supposed to be the one place where that doesn’t happen. I remember as a 6th grader refusing to go back to a Sunday School class where I was being bullied. This was back in the days of large Sunday School classes. Eventually my mother got me to be her “assistant” teaching a younger class and we made a glorious mess of paper mâché disciples. My church experience was that church kids were just as snarky as non-church kids. How many people have been judged or hurt in churches and turned away from faith as a result?

We have received unselfish, unlimited and gracious love from God, and God expects us to pass that on. This is not easy. Churches have people with all types of personalities. We won’t naturally mesh with everyone. Hopefully Penn Wynne will grow again in the months and years ahead, but we may have different political beliefs and different interests than some of these new people. People can also sometimes be thoughtless, uninformed or self-obsessed and hurt our feelings. Our first inclination will be to snub them back. Community is hard work! Yet God puts us in imperfect communities for a reason, and that reason is generally so we can knock the rough edges off each other. Each conflict, every misunderstanding, every negative thought, is an opportunity for growth. We don’t have to like everyone, **but we do have to love everyone**, which means treating them like we would want to be treated.

Now I know the level of emotional maturity many of us have in practice when the rubber hits the road. We talk a great talk until we’re angry about something. We say, “*Okay, but they have to start being nice to me first!*” Or if we do the right thing and reach out with lovingkindness and patience first and that other person does not respond back to us in the “correct” way, *well then that’s just plain not fair and I quit*. And that, my friends, is immature love. It is not perfect love. Because if we truly know how much God loves us then we would never seek to harm someone else God loves, no matter how obnoxious they were.

We’ve been on Zoom this year. But soon we’re going to start inching our way back to live in-person worship. We may begin outdoors. We may do some other live in-person outdoor activities. We’ll be together, and we won’t be perfect. So let us pledge anew to allow other people to make mistakes, and to be patient with them and with ourselves when we make mistakes. Let us pray for God’s abundant and perfect love to fill our hearts and our fellowship, because as 1 John says, “Anyone who loves God must also love their brother and sister.” Amen.

Psalm 36: 5-11

⁵Your love, Lord, reaches to the heavens,
your faithfulness to the skies.

⁶Your righteousness is like the highest mountains,
your justice like the great deep.

You, Lord, preserve both people and animals.
7 How priceless is your unfailing love, O God!
People take refuge in the shadow of your wings.
8 They feast on the abundance of your house;
you give them drink from your river of delights.
9 For with you is the fountain of life;
in your light we see light.
10 Continue your love to those who know you,
your righteousness to the upright in heart.
11 May the foot of the proud not come against me,
nor the hand of the wicked drive me away.

1 John 4:7-21

7 Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. 8 Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. 9 This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. 10 This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. 11 Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. 12 No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us. 13 This is how we know that we live in him and he in us: He has given us of his Spirit. 14 And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world. 15 If anyone acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God, God lives in them and they in God. 16 And so we know and rely on the love God has for us. God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in them. 17 This is how love is made complete among us so that we will have confidence on the day of judgment: In this world we are like Jesus. 18 There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love. 19 We love because he first loved us. 20 Whoever claims to love God yet hates a brother or sister is a liar. For whoever does not love their brother and sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen. 21 And he has given us this command: Anyone who loves God must also love their brother and sister.