

“Love – Not Hate”

June 28, 2015

Marked for Life in Christ series

These words from First John are written near the end of the first century AD. There was real struggle and real fear. And the writer is battling rumors about Jesus – that Jesus was simply a spirit who appeared to be human. Some people are claiming that Jesus is not God Incarnate – fully human and fully divine – not the Word made flesh.

Along with these claims, there was division among early Christians about how they were to live. Some felt that Jesus’ actions set the moral standard of behavior, while others held that believing in Jesus was all that mattered and what they did wasn’t so important. The writer wants to clear up these misconceptions, so he writes a sermon about his experience of Jesus. He wants to be clear.

Our struggles today may look different, but we struggle with how we live out our faith most effectively. Take some time to read this letter. The writer assures us that Jesus really was raised from the dead. God has done something amazing, and it surprised everyone! And when we put their faith in the risen Jesus, we have new life and new hope!

FAITH – the foundation of our life in Jesus and that deep-down trust that’s nurtured throughout our lives as we spend time with God in personal prayer and as we get together and share our faith with others. HOPE – a product of faith...living hope - strong, confident expectation that rests not in what we can do, but in what God can do.

Finally, we come to LOVE. Love is what faith and hope look like in action. We’ve seen LOVE triumph over hate as people have responded in love - not hate. We’ve all been amazed and hopefully transformed by what we’ve witnessed in Charleston and around the world. This is the love that the writer talks about here - that love that’s beyond what we can offer on our own strength.

The writer also reminds us that we are children of God. When we claim to be children of God, we claim that God is the Creator and that we’re dependent on God. And living as children of God means acting like it, not just calling ourselves “children of God” and then doing whatever we want. We have to consider how our lives are a response to God’s love for us.

But love isn’t emotion. Our emotions are unreliable – sometimes even volatile. First John gives us guidance. Love is the buzzword here – it appears 27 times in these verses! And love requires relationship – a relationship with God and relationship with others. Love requires trust. And trust is no small thing! We hear more about mistrust,

distrust, and breaches of trust every day that anything else! Trust is a premium, and it's hard to find.

The writer uses the word "abide," meaning that there's a decision and commitment made. Love shows itself in actions. A friend reminded me that "love may be done, but left unspoken, but it certainly is not spoken but left undone." One writer says, "To say we love someone, but then fail to treat them lovingly, proves that we do not really mean what we have said."

Think of what it feels like you're your car is out of alignment – when something isn't quite right. God's Word asks us whether our tongues and feet are in alignment. Do our actions match what we say we believe? Do we have integrity?

I read these verses and think, "Yeah, I get it." But then I realize that the writer understands us all too well. We need encouragement to love one another because there are times that we don't love. There are times when our hearts are full of hatred. There are times when we say that we love God and yet we actively don't love others. Perhaps there was a situation in this early Christian community where people had taken sides, and the debate was heated. Perhaps people had tossed aside the rule of love and instead were being hateful to each other.

I hope that the video we watched made you uncomfortable. This is one real example of the struggle we have to truly being loving. It shows us how much our witness to God's love matters - how people are affected by what we say, what we do, and where we shake out in the end. The waitress's response is all too common. "Stupid hypocrites!"

Yes, it's one example, but it's real. This isn't a judgment on a particular family, but rather a call to you and me to examine ourselves. First John uses AGAPE - love that originates with God. It's described as "spontaneous, unmerited, creative love flowing from God to a Christian, and from a Christian to a fellow Christian." The word we might use is GRACE.

One writer says, Christians "should not be known as the finger pointers on the earth, but rather the lovers on the earth – overlooking the faults of others, extending grace and mercy (which is no less than what Christ did for us). Hurting people in our communities should be able to say, "I need to feel loved; I should go find a Christian."

We can love each other even if we don't agree. We really can! The Supreme Court's decision on marriage has ignited passionate beliefs on every side of this issue. Even as we gather today, I know we all don't hold the same views and reactions. Some of us are overjoyed and hopeful. Some of us are troubled and uncertain. But we can rest on what Jesus calls us to do - and on what it says here in First John: Beloved, let us love one another...

Above everything else, this is the litmus test. This is how we show Jesus to the world. Jesus says, “By this everyone will know that you’re my disciples if you love one another.” It’s so important that we do this in the church and outside of it!

This is how we make disciples. Maybe you’ve heard the expression “You might be the only Bible someone reads...” Why would I want to be a part of something where love is supposed to be the common goal if I don’t experience it? Authentic Christian community is based on the love of Jesus Christ that is alive in us, shows through us, and transforms the world around us. “Love one another” is something we can agree on...

Notice the wording...it’s important. The writer of First John doesn’t say God loves. The bold proclamation is that God IS love. Love is at the center of who God is and how we understand God fully. No matter what, we begin with God is love.

God is the source of love. God makes the move to love us. Perfect love – God’s kind of love – is beyond our human ability. God who gives us the ability to love. John Wesley said that verse 19 “We love because God first loved us” is the sum of all religion. If we had to boil it down to the core of who we are, that’s it!

God is the source of love, and God acts love by sending Jesus. Our God doesn’t give lip-service, but gives life-service. Jesus offers his life for our sake, and our response is key to the whole picture. Beloved, let us love one another...

Love is at the center of what it means to be Christian - to follow Jesus Christ. When we love with love with agape love, love that makes sacrifices, love that keeps going to the end, then it’s clear that God lives in us. Love is how we show our connection to God. The Message puts it simply: “Loving God includes loving people. You’ve got to do both.”

The way God loves us – defined most clearly in God sending Jesus to earth – defines how we are to love one another. And the way we love flows from God’s love in Jesus Christ. We cannot love God until we realize that God loves us. God’s love in us inspires us to love in the same way.

Eugene Peterson says, “The two most difficult things to get straight in life are love and God. And we believe that there is a link between the two. If we want to deal with God the right way, we have to learn to love the right way. If we want to love the right way, we have to deal with God the right way. God and love can’t be separated. In Jesus, God and love are linked.”

And isn’t this powerful to hear: No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, that love is a sure sign that God is among us! And it’s useless to talk about loving God, whom we cannot see, if we can’t even love the people whom we can see! Listen to that! The challenge is to perfect love – to be an expression of God’s love for

the whole world, even the ones it's hardest to love! So hear that call above everything else today...Beloved, let us love one another...

Thanks be to God. AMEN.