



THE CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH OF NEW CANAAN

SERMON – March 30, 2008 God Is Love (All You Need Is Love – Part I)
The Reverend Harold E. Masback, III

1 John 4:7-12

⁷ *Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God.* ⁸ *Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love.* ⁹ *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.* ¹⁰ *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.* ¹¹ *Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another.* ¹² *No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.*

I was puttering around before a Sunday worship service, making sure I had everything I needed for that morning's baptism. Suddenly, there was a tugging on the bottom of my pulpit gown. I looked down to see the four-year-old sister of the baby we were baptizing. The little girl was just standing there, staring up at me with big, blue, questioning eyes. I wished her "Good morning," and I asked her if she was excited for her baby brother's baptism. She just kept staring up at me, her head tilted back, as if she were trying to figure out what to make of this strange man in a long blue robe. Finally she asked, "Are you God?" Can you imagine all the one-liners my Amy could have offered had she been there?

Only four years old, and already this little girl was on the trail of questions every single one of us shares: Where is God? How do you find God? How will you recognize God? What is God like?

Now, I know that these questions strike some of you as old news or irrelevant or maybe even just plain silly. You enjoy a settled faith and have long since either resolved your questions or set them aside. I ask your patience this morning; this sermon isn't really directed at you. For I also know that some of you struggle as I have struggled. Life and church would be so much simpler if we had a settled faith, but God has just not given us the grace to accept all of Scripture as

literal, historical fact. If you struggle with age old questions of how to find, how to recognize God in your life, than today's Scripture reading and this sermon is for you.

Eighteen years ago I was struggling with a particularly urgent quest to find, to recognize, to know the presence of God in my life. I had had powerful spiritual experiences of God, but, as I listened in church or studied my Bible, I kept running into Scriptural descriptions of a God that I couldn't recognize from my own experience: descriptions of God as a burning bush, God as a pillar of fire, God as a disembodied voice. I couldn't find a way to reconcile my own understanding of reality with the historical claims of scripture. I couldn't find a way to reconcile my own ambiguous spiritual experiences with the more certain, literal claims of the church's creeds. Put differently, I was struggling to reconcile my faith and my reason, to reconcile my heart and my head.

My curiosity, my need to understand, became so urgent, and my dissatisfaction with the life that I was leading became so profound, that I took a leave of absence from my law firm to chase the questions. I was going to hunker down with my Bible for a year, bring all my lawyerly skills to bear, and "crack the code." Month after month, I pored over the Old and New Testaments looking to build a case for Biblical truth that my reason could accept.

I know you will all be shocked to hear that I was unable to "crack the code." As my frustrations mounted, Amy suggested that I sign up for some classes, and it turned out that the only course that fit my schedule was an evening program at Georgetown University. But Georgetown wouldn't let me in unless I met with a Jesuit Priest for an admissions interview.

The appointed hour came, and I went into the priest's office for the interview. There just couldn't be any point in beating around the bush with a priest, so I told him flat out – I had had powerful spiritual experiences

that had convinced me of the importance of finding God in my life, but I found some of the Bible's literal descriptions of God confusing rather than helpful. Putting my dilemma metaphorically, I said that I was convinced that there were spiritual gifts on the altar of the sanctuary essential to a flourishing life, but that I was blocked at the door of the sanctuary by creeds and dogma I just couldn't believe.

The kindly priest looked at me for a while, and then said simply, "Did it ever occur to you that there are many different doors to the sanctuary? Why don't you try another door? Find a door to the sanctuary you *can* go through. You might find that all doors lead eventually to the same altar."

Try another door. That was the advice that cleared my path on my faith journey. And that is the advice I pass along to you if you are struggling on yours.

A faith journey doesn't begin with all the answers. The journey is the answer. The doubts you struggle with, the hunger you have for answers, these are all proof that God is working in your life, nudging, tweaking, needling you along. As Blaise Pascal wrote, "You would not seek him if you had not already found him." The truly Godless have no doubts and no hunger. They simply don't care. Your caring, your doubts are expressions of your faith. Try another door.

Today's Scripture lesson from the First Letter of John provides one of those great "other doors." If you are struggling with how to see God, how to recognize God, how to find God in your life, I know of no better "other door" than the six verses assigned as today's reading.

John tells us how to see God in both senses of the question: John both teaches us *how* we should look and *what* we should look for. In fact, if we read closely, John will teach us three vital lessons of faith: first, how to look, how to recognize the presence of God in our lives; second, what to look for, the nature of the God we'll find; and, third, what this all means for our life together as a church of fellow seekers.

Let's begin with John's first lesson, John's lesson on how to look, how to recognize the presence of God in our lives. At the very beginning of the letter, John

writes, "*We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life*" (1 John 1:1-4).

Right there in the first line of his letter, John asks for our attention not by appealing to ancient Scripture, not by reciting ancient creed, and not by theological argument. John goes right to lived experience, right to the senses: he declares, "*what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands . . .*"

This isn't philosophical speculation – this is existential testimony. "Hey, listen up, this is something that happened to me and changed my life forever. I want you to experience it too!" To John, spirituality is like the fragrance of a rose. You don't describe a rose's fragrance by giving somebody an explanation or chemical analysis of the fragrance. You say, "Hey, this rose smells beautiful. Here, smell it for yourself!"

How do you see God? John teaches us that you see God by paying careful attention to your lived experience, by paying close attention to the way God is acting in your life and in God's creation all around you. Yes, Bible study is important, yes statements of faith are important, yes theology is important, but maybe they are most important so you will know what to look for, what to listen for, what to reach out for and feel in your own lived experience.

John's second lesson teaches us what to look for, what God will look like when we experience God.

When John looked, listened, and felt for the presence of God, what did he find? John tells us in today's reading, "God is Love." Think about how simple and powerful and consequential these three little words are. John does not say "God is loving." He does not say "Love is *one* of the things God does." He does not say "God is *like* love." John says simply, directly, unambiguously, "God *is* love."

Martin Luther would emphasize John's verse, saying "God is nothing but love."¹ When St. Augustine preached on this passage 1,600 years ago, he turned the sentence around saying simply "Love is God."²

Do you wish to see God? Do you wish to experience God? Do you wish to know God personally? John's prescription is simple and direct. If you would know the God that is love, then you must love. John writes, "everyone who loves is born of God and knows God" (v. 7). And, "If we love one another, God lives in us" (v. 12). And, conversely, "whoever does not love does not know God" (v. 8).

But of course, there is a catch. None of us can do it – at least not by ourselves. For John is not talking about human love, he's not talking about how we love chocolate, or love the Yankees, or love our wives. These are beautiful human capacities, but they are not the love that *is* God. If you savor a delicious box of Godiva chocolates this afternoon, don't exclaim, "My, God is strong today!" And if you let your wife down, don't excuse yourself by noting, "I'm so sorry, honey – God was weak."

John isn't talking about human love; he is talking about divine love – the love of a God who loves us so much that he sends his Son knowing we will reject him. This is the love we Christians call "agape" – the love that is self-sacrificing, other-regarding love – the love that seeks to nurture a neighbor even when the cost is high and the neighbor may not love us back. It is a love we know because we saw it lived out in the life of Jesus. John writes: "*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*" (v. 9).

This "agape" love is a love we *are* able to share only because God loved us first. John writes, "*let us love one another, because love is from God*" (1 John 4:7) and "*we love because he first loved us*" (4:19). God's love warms our hearts until a spark of gratitude ignites our ability to love others. Think of it as a cosmic chain reaction that God sent rippling across the entire fabric of creation. God's love for Jesus leads to Jesus' love for his disciples leads to the disciples' love for the people they gathered into churches, and on down through history to us.

Finally, John's third lesson is what this all means for our life together as a community of fellow seekers, what we must do as a congregation. John's answer is, again, direct: "*Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another*" (1 John 4:12). If we would see the God that is love, then we must love one another.

And if we are to love one another as God loves us, we must learn to see one another as God sees us. As Lidabell said so often, "We must see Christ in others so we might be Christ to others."

There is an old story, called "The Rabbi's Gift," told most recently by Scott Peck. A monastic order had fallen on hard times until only one monastery and five old monks remained. In the woods near the monastery was a little hut that a rabbi from the nearby town used from time to time for meditation. As the demise of their order drew near, the abbot decided to pay a call on the rabbi.

The abbot explained his problem and the rabbi commiserated with him. Attendance was failing at the synagogue as well. And so the two read the Torah and wept together. As the abbot rose to leave, they embraced and the abbot said, "It has been a wonderful thing that we should meet after all these years, but I have still failed in my purpose for coming here. Is there nothing you can tell me that would help me save my dying order?" "No, I am sorry," the rabbi responded, "I have no advice to give. The only thing I can tell you is that the Messiah is one of you."

When the abbot returned to the monastery, his fellow monks gathered around him to hear the rabbi's advice. "He couldn't help," the abbot answered. "We just wept and read the Torah together. The only thing he did say, just as I was leaving, was that the Messiah is one of us. I have no idea what he meant."

In the days and weeks and months that followed, the old monks pondered the old rabbi's words. The Messiah is one of us? Could he possibly have meant one of us monks here at the monastery? Which one? Do you suppose he meant the abbot? Yes, if he meant anyone, he probably meant the abbot. He has been our leader for more than a generation. On the other hand, he might have meant Brother Thomas. Certainly Brother Thomas is a holy man. Surely he could not have meant Brother Elred! Elred gets so crotchety at times. But come to think of it, Elred is virtually always right. Often very right. Maybe the rabbi did mean Brother Elred. But surely not Brother Phillip. Phillip is such a nobody. But then, he has a gift for somehow always being there when you need him. He just mysteriously appears by your side. Maybe Phillip is the Messiah. Of course the rabbi didn't mean me. He

couldn't possibly have meant me. Yet supposing he did? Suppose I am the Messiah?

As they contemplated in this manner, the old monks began to see each other differently and to treat each other with great love on the off chance that one of them just might be the Messiah. The occasional visitor couldn't help but notice an aura of love that now surrounded the five old monks and permeated their monastery.

The visitors began to return and to bring their friends to show them this special place. And their friends brought their friends. Some of the younger men who came to visit the monastery started to talk more and more with the old monks. After a while one asked if he could join them. Then another. And another. So within a few years the monastery had once again become a thriving order, all thanks to the rabbi's gift.³

My brothers and sisters, how do we see one another? It is a critical question, for it will determine if and how we will see God. Do we see one another with the hard eyes of the marketplace, quick to assess flaw and foible? Or do we see one another with the soft eyes of Christ, seeing the love of God even in cheating tax collectors and adulterous women?

Can we detect flaws in our ministers and fellow congregants? That's really not much of an achievement; it requires only ordinary human sight. If we would be extraordinary, we must see with extraordinary vision, we must see not just the foibles but also the beauty in every single one of us. If we would see God, we must learn to see one another as God sees us. We must see with love, for God is Love. **Amen.**

1 "Lectures on the First Epistle of St. John," *Luther's Works*, Vol. 30 (St. Louis: Concordia, 1967), pp. 218-221.

2 St. Augustine, "Homily VII on the First Epistle of John." Available online at <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/170207.htm>.

3 M. Scott Peck, *The Different Drum: Community Making and Peace* (New York: Touchstone, 1998), pp. 13-14.