

Sermon for Zion, August 2, 2020 – Letters of John, Part 4

Hymns: Bless This House; 20 – The steadfast love of the Lord (1,2); 373 – Jesus loves me, this I know; 314 – God is love, come heaven adoring (1,2)

Scripture: 1 John 4:7-12, :19

Sermon: Because He First Loved Us

1 John 4:7-12, :19

Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. 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. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us... We love because he first loved us.

One of the great joys of my life is my beautiful granddaughter, Aoife. Whenever I see her, whether on FaceTime or in person, I'm guaranteed to get a big smile, and it melts my heart every time. She's learning so much, figuring out the world and how it works. It is fascinating to watch her as she develops, with new discoveries every week – sometimes, it seems, every day. I'm looking forward to being part of that process, and of teaching her one or two things myself.

Above all, I want her to know – as I think she already does – that her Opa – that's me – loves her. That when I look at her, I look at her with eyes of love. And that I always will. And that she will always know that, no matter what.

And together with that, part and parcel, I want her to know – as I think she already does – that God loves her. That when God looks at her, it is with eyes of love. And that God always will love her. And that she will always know that, no matter what. That's how God loves us.

You see, I've always loved Aoife. Aoife didn't have to earn that love – how could she, she's just a baby – but from the moment she was born, and I saw her, and held her, I loved her. And I told her so, with my first words to her. “Hello, Aoife,” I said. “You are so beautiful! Welcome to the world! I am your Opa, and I love you.”

Right now, Aoife responds to that love with grins and smiles and wonderful hugs. As the years go by, she'll respond in different ways. I am looking forward to the first time she says, "Opa." And I'm really looking forward to the first time she says, "Opa, I love you." And I will say, "I love you too, Aoife. I always have." And I do. And I will. And I would give my life for her, without hesitation.

The difference between that and God's love for us is, God has already given his life for us, already, without hesitation. All to prove his love. For you. For me. For us all. That's how God loves us.

And that's what John is getting at in our letter today. He's not just getting at it; he says it outright. Listen again:

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. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.

God's love comes first. It is God's very essence. God is, John says, and Jesus demonstrated, love. It is the first principle. It is at the root of how, and why, and who we are. God created the world in love. God created us in love. God taught us and told us and showed us how to respond to that love by loving God and loving one another.

In fact, loving one another, says Jesus, says John, is one of the best ways we can respond to God's love for us. "Love one another as I have loved you," says Jesus. "How can you say you love God, who you cannot see, while hating your brother, who you can see?" writes John in the very chapter we're reading this morning, just in case what Jesus said wasn't clear.

But what doesn't seem to be sufficiently clear for us to understand, the thing we've found hard to get a handle on, is that God's love for us comes first. We don't achieve some particular level of goodness and piety which flips a kind of switch, causing God to take notice of us and begin to love us. No, God loves us. First. We don't earn God's love by doing all kinds of wonderful things for others. We can't earn it; it is already there. What we can do, in doing all kinds of wonderful things for others, is respond to God's love.

This is the difference between religion and relationship. Religion is undertaking a series of activities or actions or rituals to incur the favour of a god or gods. Relationship is about interacting on the basis of love. It is why Christianity is not, at its core, a religion. It is a relationship between us, and the God who loves us. The structure of worship, and the discipline of our lives as Christians – the rules of our relationship, as it were – is to assist us in properly responding to that love. Because love does require structure and discipline and some degree of self-sacrifice. Love without these things is mere indulgence. Let me explain.

All of us, I'm sure, know a child whom we would describe as "spoiled." I'm not sure if that is an acceptable word any longer, so I checked it out on the all-knowing Internet. It tells me that, "A spoiled child is a derogatory term aimed at children who exhibit behavioral problems from being overindulged by their parents or other caregivers. Children and teens who are perceived as spoiled may be better described as 'overindulged', 'grandiose', 'narcissistic' or 'egocentric-regressed'." Unhappily we are discovering that this is true not only of children or teens, but heads of state.

Which is not how you want your child or grandchild to turn out. Not if you love them! And so there are times when it is necessary to establish some pretty firm guidelines, directions as to what is acceptable and unacceptable behaviour, and a series of consequences arising from failing to follow these rules. This does not mean that as a parent or grandparent, you do not love your child. The imposition of guidelines, rules and consequences are in fact signs of that love. But the love has to come first, or the guidelines, rules and consequences can easily become distorted, unjust, even abusive.

God has given us guidelines, rules and consequences. The Ten Commandments are a good example; the commandment to love one another, to show compassion to those in need, to feed the poor, to care for the ailing, are the ways in which Jesus both explained and demonstrated just what loving God and loving one another means. And Jesus told many a parable about the consequences of living selfishly, hatefully, contemptuous of others. Cutting yourself off from God, from the source of all love, by living selfishly, hatefully, contemptuous of others, never ends well.

But the point is, all that God asks of us, God asks of us in love. Not as a prerequisite to God loving us; but as a way to help us understand love, live in love, respond to love. That's what I hope to show Aoife; and that's the love in which she will grow, and thrive, and blossom.

One of the most beautiful passages of Scripture, a passage which has always spoken to me so deeply of God's love, is found in an unlikely place; not in the New Testament, suffused with the words of Jesus; but in the Old. And not in the Psalms, or the prophets like Isaiah. No, these words are found in a section of the Old Testament known as the Minor Prophets.

They're called "minor" not because they are unimportant, but because they are shorter than big books like Isaiah or Jeremiah or Ezekiel, the "major Prophets." And in all honesty, they often seem to be pretty gloomy, generally pretty exercised or upset about something, and not often good bedtime reading. But in the midst of the doom and gloom breaks the occasional light, glowing all the more brightly in the surrounding dark. This light is always about God's love, which insists on shining through, even when things seem at their most desperate.

And one such moment is in the book of Zephaniah. Filled with dire predictions of the calamity about to fall upon various nations and peoples for their constant warring, their injustices, their inequities, just when we think all is lost, a vision of God's love overtakes even grumpy Zephaniah's prophecies of the end. It is a vision of a parent comforting a beloved child, a cherished grandchild; it captures in sharp-edged ancient Hebrew the very essence of the words and actions of comfort I whispered and sang in my granddaughter's ear just days ago, as I held her, soothed her, dried her tears. Listen (Zephaniah 3:14-17):

Sing, O Daughter of Zion; shout aloud, O Israel! Be glad and rejoice with all your heart, O Daughter of Jerusalem! The LORD has taken away your punishment, he has turned back your enemy. The LORD, the King of Israel, is with you; never again will you fear any harm. On that day they will say to Jerusalem,

"Do not fear, O Zion; do not let your hands hang limp. The LORD your God is with you, he is mighty to save. He will take great delight in you, he will quiet you with his love, he will rejoice over you with singing."

I'll never forget when someone heard those words for the first time, at a Sunday service in a former church of mine. Have I told you about her? She was what is commonly known as a "troubled teen," living with her grandparents, having been removed from her home by the Children's Aid. Her mother, you see, crippled by addiction, wasn't really there for her in any meaningful way. And her father, I am sorry to tell you, did not love her. Her father thought she was inconvenient, a pain, a waste of time, and told her so. "I never wanted you" was about the nicest thing he ever said to her. She developed a sense of self-worth which reflected her father's constant physical and emotional abuse of her. Her young arms bore bruises and scars of a life she thought not worth living. And there she sat in church on a Sunday morning with her grandparents, a sullen teen, angry, not wanting to be there, not wanting to be anywhere, really. When for the first time she heard about another father. Her Heavenly Father. What did she hear?

I, The LORD God, am with you, I am mighty to save. I will take great delight in you, I will quiet you with my love, I will rejoice over you with singing.

And somehow, those words got through. Somehow, the Holy Spirit opened her heart, quieted the voices in her mind, and enabled her to hear those words. And her head lifted up and her eyes opened, and because she didn't know how to behave in church, and maybe because she didn't much care anymore what anyone thought of her, and maybe because she didn't have anything to lose, she did something which no one had ever done in my experience before, or since. She interrupted my sermon, and said, in a voice that carried throughout the congregation, "Hey. Read that again." So I did.

I, The LORD God, am with you, I am mighty to save. I will take great delight in you, I will quiet you with my love, I will rejoice over you with singing.

Now the whole congregation was paying attention. Many had dropped into the kind of mental cruise control that happens about 12 minutes into a sermon, their minds already home for lunch, but now all heads were up, all eyes open, people looking around for the source of the quavering voice. And it came once more: "Again."

I, The LORD God, am with you, I am mighty to save. I will take great delight in you, I will quiet you with my love, I will rejoice over you with singing.

And for the first time, for the first time in her life, as she sat, shoulders shaking, tears falling, all her normal defiance and defences cast aside; for the first time in her life, she heard of a Father who loves her. A Father who takes delight in her. Who quiets her torn and battered heart. Who rejoices over her with singing. Suddenly, in God, she has a Father who loves her. And always has. And always will. And as she cried, other tears joined hers, tears of those who knew but had somehow forgotten, tears of those who had come to take for granted a Father's love. Because, *"This is love: not that we loved God, but that he first loved us."*

This is your Heavenly Father. This is his love for you. This is what Jesus lived and died to tell you, what his disciples lived and died to tell you, what John is trying to put into words for you, and what you now hear again today. You have a Father in Heaven. And your Father loves you. And always, always has. And always, always will.

Accept His love. Embrace his love. Be embraced by his love. Fill your heart, your soul, your life with that love. And in responding, share it with all the world.

This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us... We love because he first loved us.

Thanks be to God. Amen.