

I John 4:7-21

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

By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit. And we have seen and do testify that the Father has sent his Son as the Savior of the world. God abides in those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God and they abide in God. So we have known and believe the love that God has for us.

God is love and those who abide in love abide in God and God abides in them. Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness on the day of judgment because as he is, so are we in this world. There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. We love because he first loved us. Those who say, "I love God," and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.

FROM LIGHT TO DARKNESS: PART II

NO-BRAINER

I JOHN 4:7-21

Nearly 700 years ago, Dante wrote his epic poem, *The Divine Comedy*, in which he paints a picture of hell that is much more graphic than anything in the Bible. In the section called, *Inferno*, hell is not a raging fire, but freezing cold. The hell that Dante envisions is a series of concentric circles containing the souls of people being punished for a variety of iniquities. The seriousness of the sin increases as the observer moves from the first circle to the ninth. For example, those in the second circle are being punished for lust while those in the ninth are paying the price for treacherous fraud against individuals and communities. And as you go deeper into the ring of circles, it grows colder and colder until at the ninth level, the sinners are actually frozen in place. At that fatal level, Dante depicts two damned souls who do not face each other. Instead, they are pressed together chest to back, with one gnawing the back of the other's head.

What a chilling description of the direction in which both our world and society seem to be metaphorically moving. And what is even more chilling is the patently clear observation we can all make that there are numerous people out there who are intentionally driving us like cattle into deep divisions to meet their own needs for power and to provide a cover for whatever fraudulent activity in which they wish to engage or to advance their cause to promote their political vision of a world where one ethnic group or nationality crushes those they consider inferior, dangerous or immoral or who simply violate their own ethical view of the world.

And because through social media everyone now has immediate access to virtually everyone in the world, the opportunity to spread lies, vicious assaults and even training in terrorist techniques, the ability to influence the beliefs, opinions and actions of others is nearly unlimited. The Russian attempts to undermine our democracy by spreading hate-filled tweets

to promote extremist points of view in a campaign to widen the divisions between us and delegitimize our elections as well as those in other Western nations, is a diabolical act of cyber warfare.

It is a crisis of cataclysmic spiritual proportions as well in which each and every one of us plays a role whether we want to or not. We are all being dragged into the struggle. It is simply unavoidable unless we want to go into our homes, close the curtains, and shut off all access to news and communication with anyone in the outside world. And who is going to do that?

This is Part II in our post resurrection period between Easter and Pentecost in which we are exploring the challenge of making choices between opposing universal forces as we ask the question of what the resurrection actually means to us who live in the twenty-first century. All of our themes are related, of course, but each presents nuances on a similar question of how to shed light into darkness. Last week, we focused on the opposing forces of good versus evil on both a universal scale and within our individual selves. Next week we will shall tackle the dynamics of fear versus joy. And today, we shall deliberate the very relevant issue of choosing between love and hate.

The First Letter of John may or may not have been written by the Apostle who was one of the original Twelve and purportedly authored the Gospel attributed to his name. The themes are certainly the same, but the letter seems less universal in the sense that it appears to be addressed to specific churches which are struggling with issues around a contentiousness which has cropped up, the nature of which is non-specific. All we know is that “fear” and “hate” have become problematic—likely within the congregations themselves. But it wouldn’t be surprising that on another level John was speaking to a spiritual warfare occurring within all of us.

In any event, his call to love echoes what we read in the Gospel of John which famously proclaims that *God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son...* Our scripture similarly says, *God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him.* In both

cases, God is not only synonymous with love, God is love itself. As John presents it, love is not just a quality, but a Power—the very Source of the universe.

That may be difficult for us to wrap our minds around because it means we cannot quantify or study Divine love as though it were a psychological human condition such as *limerence*. While you may not be familiar with the term, you may well be familiar with the experience. Limerence happens mostly to adolescents, but it could also upend the lives of mature adults. It occurs when you develop a huge “Crush” on someone; when you can’t sleep, you can’t concentrate and you become totally obsessed with the object your desire. It has been described as a temporary state of insanity and it can actually be dangerous leading some people to very destructive actions—such as murder in a fit of jealous rage.

We casually throw the word love around assuming everyone knows what we mean so that it can become a soggy platitude, the subject of ballads and mournful country songs. In their wisdom, the Greeks actually had three different terms for love to help differentiate the meaning they were trying to convey—*agape*, of course, being the one used to describe the love of God; the selfless, unconditional love with which God regards us and to which we are called to have for one another.

But is this love, this *agape*, even emotional? How do we know it when we see it, or even better, when we feel it? I would argue that it is as palpable as its opposite—which is hatred. And the best example I can present you with which many of us have had is what you experience when you hold your child for the first time. I don’t know that anyone can adequately describe that. But you feel it and when we do so, we understand on some transcendent level that this love could only come from God.

So with this in mind, listen again to the Scripture: *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. 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. Beloved, since God loves us so much, we also ought to love one another...If we love*

one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.

One spiritual writer articulates it beautifully when he says: “Nothing motivates, nothing clarifies, nothing brings a sense of urgency like the power of love, and nothing attracts like love. We could say that love is an existential template laid down within us and that, no matter what our training or culture is, we all recognize it for what it is, and, if we are wisely open to Guidance, we act on it.”

Now here is the issue. When we juxtapose this divinely inspired love with its opposite, hatred, we immediately understand they cannot co-exist. As our scripture says: *Those who say, “I love God,” and hate their brothers or sisters are liars, for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.*

But the climate in which we are living encourages just the opposite. Let me take you back a month or so to that highly publicized election for an open Congressional seat in the Pittsburgh area. It was going to be—and was—an extremely tight race and in a last minute, seemingly desperate attempt to sway reluctant voters to his side, Republican candidate, Rick Saccone, went on the offensive in a television interview. He basically said this: “I have been listening to all of the liberals over the last few days and it is clear to me that they hate Trump; they hate the United States; and they hate God.”

I will admit to you that no matter which side of the aisle you sit on, it is tempting to go there. But how is that going to bring light to darkness? Is spawning hatred what the resurrection teaches us? Isn't this a No-Brainer? Why would we even participate in it? You cannot say you love God and hate your brother or sister. We would be wise to heed the words of George Washington Carver who said, “Fear of something is at the root of hate for others, and hate within will eventually destroy the hater.”

In Dante's, *Inferno*, there is no way out. But for us, the way out of hell is to always

choose love over hatred. Otherwise, we might find ourselves gnawing on each other's heads eternally.

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