

“Creating A Community Of Love”

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1 John 4:7-21

1John 4:7-21 (The Message)

My beloved friends, let us continue to love each other since love comes from God. Everyone who loves is born of God and experiences a relationship with God. The person who refuses to love doesn't know the first thing about God, because God is love—so you can't know him if you don't love. This is how God showed his love for us: God sent his only Son into the world so we might live through him. This is the kind of love we are talking about—not that we once upon a time loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as a sacrifice to clear away our sins and the damage they've done to our relationship with God.

My dear, dear friends, if God loved us like this, we certainly ought to love each other. No one has seen God, ever. But if we love one another, God dwells deeply within us, and his love becomes complete in us—perfect love!

This is how we know we're living steadily and deeply in him, and he in us: He's given us life from his life, from his very own Spirit. Also,

we've seen for ourselves and continue to state openly that the Father sent his Son as Savior of the world. Everyone who confesses that Jesus is God's Son participates continuously in an intimate relationship with God. We know it so well, we've embraced it heart and soul, this love that comes from God.

God is love. When we take up permanent residence in a life of love, we live in God and God lives in us. This way, love has the run of the house, becomes at home and mature in us, so that we're free of worry on Judgment Day—our standing in the world is identical with Christ's. There is no room in love for fear. Well-formed love banishes fear. Since fear is crippling, a fearful life—fear of death, fear of judgment—is one not yet fully formed in love.

We, though, are going to love—love and be loved. First we were loved, now we love. He loved us first.

If anyone boasts, “I love God,” and goes right on hating his brother or sister, thinking nothing of it, he is a liar. If he won't love the person he can see, how can he love the God he can't see? The command we have from Christ is blunt: Loving God includes loving people. You've got to love both.

There are 35 references in this passage to “love.” If we were to wager a guess, what would you say John’s focus was in this passage?

Now, you may have heard many sermons or talks on God’s love. You may have heard about how love is not merely a feeling — it’s not a romantic notion. Also, you’ve probably heard that no matter what you have done or will do in the future, you will always be loved by God.

You may have even heard love described as “agape,” to use the Greek translation. Remember that Greek was the language in which our New Testament was written, so not all, but a number of the references to love in the New Testament, were about this particular kind of love called “agape” and this is the word used throughout this passage in 1 John.

The Greeks actually had at least six different words for love, each one describing a different dimension or quality of love. All of these are expressed by God in relationship with us and the world. Here is a quick run down.

- **Eros** — This is about intimate love — related to passion and desire, and includes the appreciation of beauty within

another. Some have written that erotic love is also the same driving energy force of our spiritual passion toward God.

- **Philia** — This describes a deep friendship and loyalty between equals, like those who fight together in war, or the strong bonds between parents and children in family or the bonds between close friends in community. Philia is what has us sacrificing and sharing emotionally with others.

- **Ludus** — This is about a playful love. It is the spirit captured between children or young couples. It is also what has us sitting around enjoying each others’ company as we share stories, joke, and laugh together.

- **Pragma** — Longstanding love is central for this kind of love. It’s what is known by couples who have been married for 50 years and noted by compromise in the middle of differences, patience, and wholehearted giving, not just receiving. The noted psychoanalyst Erich Fromm said that as a culture we expend too much energy on “falling in love” and need to learn better how to “stand in love.” Pragma holds a commitment to stand in love over the long haul.

• **Philautia** — This is about love of the self. The Greeks recognized that there are two different kinds of this sort of love. One kind is about an unhealthy kind of narcissism where there is a self-absorption and everything is done for personal fame and fortune. The second is a healthy kind where love for yourself creates an inner security that then provides a greater capacity to love others.

• **Agape** is the sixth kind of love for the Greeks, and equated to the depths of God's way of loving, however this does not preclude God from loving in all of the other ways as well. Agape holds an unconditional high regard for the wellness of others, and is not dependent on their ability or even interest in loving back. This is also not only for a select group, but for everyone. Thomas Aquinas wrote about agape saying it was to "will the good of another."

So, a person's will, their energy, their attention, their heart, their sweat equity, and all of their efforts are in alignment toward the well being of others.

This is a love that survives when all else falls away. Agape love is a love that can transform the world. It can bring down mountains and calm the raging seas.

Agape is the most powerful force in the universe, and yet also the most subtle, tender, and sweet note of hope, grace, or encouragement in the center of our wounded lives.

Scripture tells us that agape love is the heart of God.

It is good to know all of these things about love. It helps to have an understanding of what this unconditional agape love is all about and how it is demonstrated by God in the person of Jesus.

And yet knowing about it and understanding it really makes no difference in our lives or our world. Yes, you heard me right. Just knowing about love makes no difference — because love, in order to be worth anything must be embodied and lived.

Love is about how you live — but it is more than that. It is about who we are as human beings in God's community. When embodied, it is the foundation on which all action is taken — it is the motivation, the glue, the heart and soul behind all of life for the Church.

John, in his letter is pointing to the reality that God has been revealed in the world as love in bodily form.

When we truly see Jesus, we see agape love in action. And when we imitate Jesus, truly follow Jesus, we also will embody love. When we are committed to live like Jesus lived, our lives will radiate a declaration of love for the world above all else.

That is easy to say, but takes a whole lot more to live out.

Agape love is essential for the community of faith. Without love we truly cannot be the Church.

We might even be doing the right kinds of things so that others look at the Church and see good things happening, but if we are doing it with a different motivation than love, then it will not work over time. The core motivation will be revealed and it will fall apart.

But love will last. Love is the only foundation on which the Church can be built. It is on love that everything else rests.

John is making a statement about the central essence of God and what must be the central essence of the Christian community.

To be authentically Christian, our lives cannot be focused on, founded on, or built around any other central idea, philosophy, creed, doctrine, or behavior —

nothing is more important in a faith community than the centrality of love.

People outside the Church see right through us in an instant. This is what has hurt the Church's reputation over the past decades. One of the most harsh, and perhaps accurate, criticisms of the Church has been our blatant hypocrisy and inauthenticity.

The Church has been branded as a closed group of people who smile a lot, but after scratching the surface, the smile is only a mask hiding our own sin, guilt and shame.

We are characterized as superficial people who don't have room to doubt and question, but seem to have everything figured out.

We, the Church, like to say that we are hospitable, but in reality Church communities are only open to certain kinds of people who are like us — there isn't really room to love and accept unconditionally those who are different from us.

Now all of these are stereotypes of the Church in today's American society and they either fit or they don't for any particular community.

We need to seriously examine these criticisms and others without discarding them so easily. We

need to own the criticism if there is any truth to them and do the hard work of returning to love.

Being full of love as the Church is not an easy road.

It calls us to a deeper level of authenticity.

It calls us to own our own sin.

It calls us to be real.

It calls us beyond our resistance and the places that have become comfortable for us.

It calls us to be humble.

Being the Church means demonstrating love when it isn't convenient.

When we truly love with agape love, we are reflecting the love that God has shown us and that is the kind of testimony to the world that God desires.