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“What’s Not to Love?” **Sermon on 1 John 4:18-21**

Donovan A. Drake

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Fifth Sunday of Easter

1 John 4:18-21

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. ¹⁹We 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.

When it comes to hearing the Word of the Lord, “Our ears are open!” There are easy ways to hear it, and there are more difficult ways.

I prefer easy over difficult. When I hear the passage of Prodigal Son, I see myself as the prodigal son. I’ve messed up in life, but “Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me” is as easy as hearing the water pour into the baptismal font on a Sunday morning.

It’s much more difficult for me to hear that passage from the viewpoint of the older brother. For example, having to have that amazing grace given to that little twerp, right? Maybe even a harder read might be through the eyes of the fatted calf. Ever think about it that way? You’re just minding your business out in the field and then you have to give your life for the sake of a dinner party. This is my body broken for you.

I prefer to hear an easier word! I like being the guy who is carried by his four friends to be healed by Jesus. It’s so easy to be that character - you don’t have to lift a finger. Far harder to be one of the four that had to carry me – I’m lighter than I look but still, I’m a burden.

Now think about the guy who owned the house. It is jam-packed with people straining to see Jesus. Jam-packed. People spilling red wine on a sofa cushion is the least of your worries after you hear the ceiling fall in because someone thought it was a good idea to lower a guy down to get healed by Jesus. Imagine being the homeowner... "Jesus it was nice to hear you and have you over for a miracle, but can you heal my roof? My wife and I were headed to Europe, but it's out of the question now!"

When it comes to the Word of God, take the easier way. For example, when I hear that line from 1 John, "We love because God first loved us" - it's what I like to hear, but what I choose to hear is "... God first loved us!" Don't you just love that? God first loved us! I love that. Don't you like being first in the love category? I may have been born last, but my Mom loved me first! I mean, what's not to love?

Beth and I sat around a table the other week with a woman who was obviously a Christian, you know the type. There are those happy, happy Christians who just think God loves them the most. And sometimes I feel the need to point out that it's the other way around. God loves me first! This table conversation is just one example. You see, word got out that I was pastor.

And now, when that happens, I take out my phone and show a photo of this congregation taken from the balcony on Easter. I hold it up. "Here." The photograph just keeps me from having to engage in conversation.

Do you know how long it takes to unpack the word "pastor"? You say "pastor," and all sorts of images come to mind. You have your skinny jeans pastor. You have your "I'm carrying a floppy bible around the altar" pastor. You have your, "Little Brown Church in the Vale pastor." Here! A picture says a billion words. Look at it! What's not to love?"

She looked at the photo, and she wasn't all that impressed. In fact, her response was, "I guess there needs to be buildings like that. I think of all the money spent on those church ceilings in Europe when there's so much need. But it helps inspire the heart in worship."

I said, "You would be surprised by how many non-profits came out of this congregation. You'd be surprised how much these people give. Everyone needs Jesus, even people of wealth."

It's amazing how some people will just get under your skin, and the easiest way to deal with them is to remember, "God first loved us!" We're Presbyterian and we are predestined. Which is another way of saying, "God first loved us!" Membership has its privileges.

When we baptize those babies, it shows how God is just like the mother, who loves that little one even before it's born. Heart full of hope. That even before a baby can say, "I love you" to mom or dad, they loved that baby first, and that baby just thrives in love. Then after a while, the baby responds in love. That's what we see in baptism. We love because God first loved us.

But you see, with that woman at the table, I wanted to take the easy way! The easy way for me was to bring her down, so I could come up... because after all, "God loved me first."

But that's not all God said. God has the harder part there – we love. We love – that's the harder part of this. We love because God first loved us! And so, the work and discipline on how to love the one across the table – where do you start?

Where do you start? By beginning to figure out where to start. I know this is coming late in my life, but I'm beginning to figure it out. It begins by looking squarely and deeply into your own life. I'm trying to figure out the trigger that made me want to be mean. You begin to wonder why on earth does God love me? And then you're touched by amazing grace. And then you know how to love, we just have to love.

God must love that one who is so obviously a Christian. Because God loves me even though I'm less obviously a Christian.

We had an evening recently where our new elders shared their faith stories. What a great night of listening to how God shows up in love in every single one of our new elders. I was struck by the faith story of Elizabeth Ball, because it was so unlike my own. She grew up in a church that said God loved us, but we have to straighten up a bit. You need to get your act together to really experience the love of God. Well, how hard it is to get our acts together! We keep falling short. Finally, she heard the good news that we've all fallen short of the glory of God.

She said, "I finally heard the good news, that God loved me unconditionally. Oh! The grace, the grace! Nothing I can do will make God love me any more or any less." She became fully immersed in the life of the Presbyterian church!

She then talked about her brother who, on a scouting trip in the Great Smoky Mountains, got lost in a freak snowstorm. All the scouts made it back except for her brother. Billy Graham offered to help. She learned that he probably died of hypothermia the first night. She said, "Some people said, it was just God's will." She couldn't believe it. But what do you do with so much loss and pain in the face of God? I don't know! I do know that I'd be angry with God. I think that's faith because you're shaking your fist at God! I didn't hear that in her words. And as she wept, God was weeping, too. Keeping your faith when life doesn't say faith - that's hard. To keep your faith, that's a hard way to love.

She said years later she was on a beach trip with her family, and her brother came out as gay. It was in the 1980's. He announced to his career military father and brother that he was gay.

And then he announced he had AIDS. When you had AIDS in the 1980's, there was none of this individual freedom to do whatever you wanted. No, we played it by the law. "We don't want them in our schools, in our hospitals, in our lives. That stuff will kill you!" I heard of a pastor who visited a member in the hospital who had AIDS, and he yelled a prayer from the hallway into the room. Some preachers said it was God's will on the sinners of this world.

"We were at the beach. My brother announced he was gay, and he had AIDS." She said, "I didn't know what to do with that information. I didn't know what to think about 'gay'." She said, "I just sat in the water with my diet coke and my cigarette." Now there's an image.

The harder word of scripture is to say, "We love."

Heidi read the scripture about the Ethiopian eunuch. It's in Acts, where the Spirit pushes Philip to meet an Ethiopian eunuch. Ethiopia? That's Timbuktu, that's nowhere on the map. And a eunuch? Keep the eunuch out! There he was, sitting in a chariot, reading a Bible. He must have had some money because he had a Bible, and he was reading Isaiah. "What's this about?" "It's about Jesus." "Can I be baptized?" And Philip, by the power of the Spirit, baptizes an Ethiopian eunuch. "What can prevent me from being baptized?" "Well, I can think of about 400 people in Jerusalem."

We love because Christ first loved us.

And the story Elizabeth told was of a military father and a mother who cared and loved their son every day until he died. And then the day after that, and the day after that!

There's a lot of fear and hate in this world. There's so much division in this world. A lot of it is about who to love and who to hate.

And we're being coerced by something dark to pick a side. But don't do that. Do the harder thing.

We are people who pick up a cross.

If you find a side that is stronger and more powerful than the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ...

If you can find a hatred that even Jesus couldn't redeem...

If you found that one thing... that Paul couldn't find when he wrote, "There's nothing that can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. If you found that one thing that's more powerful than the cross of Jesus Christ, then worship that! But don't come here. Because that is not what we're about here. We are about the hard thing. We love because Christ first loved us. It's our mission, it's our vision. We love.

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