

THE GLORIES OF LOVE

by Steve Zeisler

Surely the phrase "safe sex" is an oxymoron. Completely apart from concern about viruses, sex is not safe. It is too powerful. Anything so important, and so capable of drawing out the deep things in us cannot possibly be safe. Paul said that even the most casual sexual liaison between a man and a prostitute partakes of something spiritual (1 Cor. 6:16).

If it's true that the phrase "safe sex" is misleading, it is vastly more true to say that safe love is impossible. Love will never be safe. It's always risky. Love makes us vulnerable to being hurt, misunderstood, embarrassed, or taken advantage of. Love is the most powerful thing in the world with enormous potential to give life. But it is manifestly not safe.

Recently Jerry and Alice Yan (Jerry is one of the elders of this church) traveled to Los Angeles to pick up a baby whom they have adopted. Her name is Elizabeth. They went through great emotional turmoil traveling to receive this little one from the young woman who gave birth to Elizabeth. The birth mother herself went through emotional turbulence in making the judgment that she couldn't raise the child, and that Jerry and Alice were God's choice to provide the child a home. Everyone involved was taking tremendous risks for the sake of love.

I prayed with a man this week in our church whose brother is a hermit, an angry old man who is dying. The man I prayed with loves his brother, but he isn't allowed into his brother's life to care for him. If he didn't love, it wouldn't hurt.

There is a family who raised their children in this church and then went through the awful experience of seeing their son die of AIDS in his twenties. This family experienced all the pain associated with that terrible illness. Their church community and their son's homosexual friends had few points of contact. Their love for their son brought them into a circle of suffering. Love inevitably makes us vulnerable.

Recall the old Paul Simon song,

"I am a rock, I am an island...
and a rock feels no pain
and an island never cries."

This song was clearly sung to make the opposite point. Another line in the song went, "If I never loved, I never would have cried." And, of course, all of us long for love though we know that it will have all the risks associated with the possibility of pain.

So why do we take the risk? Why do we long so desperately to be loved, to connect with somebody else and give them love? How can we understand God's purposes in all this? Why did the Lord make us like himself, with the capacity to love and the longing to be loved?

That is the subject before us in 1 John 4:7-12. Remember, love is one of the great themes of this book. Twice in this chapter we'll see the profound phrase "God is love" (in 4:8 and 4:16). God himself is love, and we are called to love each other. Twice before in this book we have encountered John's teaching on love. In 1 John 2:10 he said, "Whoever loves his brother lives in the light, and there is nothing in him to make him stumble." In 3:11 he said, "This is the message you heard from the beginning: We should love one another." Now we come to 4:7-12. Note the three times in this paragraph, the phrase "love one another" occurs.

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 [or beloved], 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.

Verses 7, 11, and 12 all have the phrase "love one another" in them. But in each case the phrase concerns a different facet of this teaching on love. In the first case, we are called to recognize something that is true of God himself. We cannot take God seriously without choosing love. In the second case, we are learning something about ourselves. We can't be realistic or honest about ourselves if we don't understand the nature of love. In the third case, we are learning about the purpose of human life, what it is meant to be. We'll gather up the teachings of this paragraph around those three ideas.

Choosing love

Let me say a couple of other preliminary things. The first is that this agape love written of here is clearly not the same thing as romantic love. We are called upon to choose love here. You can't command someone to fall in love. The experience of romantic, emotional love sweeps us away, and my guess is that the majority of us at some time in our lives have felt the powerful, blind-siding experience of falling in love. Life is filled with the wonder of the person you have fallen in love with. But that is always short-lived. The experience of romantic love is something that doesn't last, and it isn't something that can be commanded.

The word agape is about something else. It is clearly a choice we can make, a call to obedience that we can respond to. In 1 John 3:16 we have a defining statement of agape love that should help us: "This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers." The idea behind this Greek word is that love is the choice of an individual to sacrifice himself for another, to give up his rights to benefit another, to stop being defensive about what he needs and what pleases him and make choices as Jesus did, to live sacrificially for the benefit of another.

Another emphasis that we find throughout the New Testament is that the choice to love this way is sometimes most profoundly rivaled by other good things. Consider Paul's statement in 1 Corinthians 8:1: "Knowledge makes arrogant [puffs up], but love edifies." Sometimes we find ourselves so enthusiastic about Bible study, theology, and the great ideas of the faith that we choose to pursue knowledge for its own sake and forget love. The fact that the alternatives to love can sometimes be very good things in their own right makes it all the more important that we understand how serious God is in calling us to choose love.

First Corinthians 13, the famous passage describing love, contrasts the use of spiritual gifts without love to the use of spiritual gifts with love. We can prophesy, speak in tongues, exhibit knowledge, have visionary faith, even give our bodies to be burned. But if we do not have love we are nothing.

We want to make our mark as biblical people, as those having aggressive ministry, as those who are doing and saying good things. Yet, if we forget to include others, if we do not link ourselves with other people who also want to serve the Lord, we are like clanging gongs or noisy cymbals; we amount to nothing.

We may build a significant building. We may found an important company. We may paint magnificent artwork. We may write inspiring literature. But if the accomplishments we pile up have been done competitively, for our own sakes, and we have rejected concern for other people, then our accomplishments are useless.

I watched the Stanford-Cal football game yesterday. It was an enjoyable game on a beautiful day. I was sitting with wonderful people and had a marvelous time. It brought to mind a recent reunion of men I played football with twenty-five years ago, Christian men and their families. That was another football team that had experiences of playing ball together, winning, losing, and so on. At the reunion we ate together, prayed together, laughed together, and rejoiced together. It was interesting that there was almost no reference in any of the conversations I had to a particular victory or loss, to a particular great play or bad play. But there were a lot

of great memories of relationships, of what it was like to work hard on something together. There were some of the most wonderful descriptions of love-interracial love, interestingly enough-between men who remembered what it was like to care for each other though the circumstances faded in importance.

Our accomplishments themselves pale in importance to the opportunities they give us to love one another. Activity gives us a medium through which we can reach out to someone else, care for them, and spend ourselves for them, give up our rights for them, revel in what God is doing in their life, and receive back again what we have given. We have the opportunity in Christ to choose love for one another. We must make the choice and not let rivals to love sweep us away, making us think that the things we do are more important than the opportunities to care about each other.

God is love

With that, let's look carefully at how John uses the phrase "love one another" in these three different ways. Verses 7 and 8 are about the nature of God: "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." John's first argument is, "Let us love one another because of who the living God himself is." John is not writing here about one of the attributes of God. Love is what God is essentially. At the greatest depth at which you can speak of the nature of God, you will speak of the nature of love. Everything he does, everything he is, all of his attributes are filled with love. We can speak of the activity of God, such as creation-speaking into being that which did not exist. But his essential heart of love was prior to that activity, prior to any attributes that we discover in observing him. He is love by nature. There is no touch of him, no knowledge of him, no awareness of him that will not have love in it.

One of the greatest mysteries of the Christian faith is that our God is a triunity, that he exists eternally as three persons in one. Father, Son, and Spirit forever love one another. God experiences love at the very center of who he is. Even the difficult things about God-the judgments, the righteous anger, the times when he acts in wrath, as the Scriptures describe it-have in them his love. There is nothing we can say that is true about God that will not contain the reality that he is love.

I sometimes counsel couples planning to get married. Occasionally the difficult circumstance comes up that one of the two is a Christian and one is not. As a pastor I have to face them with the question: How can you attempt marriage with spiritual disunity? Inevitably the discussion goes something like this: The one who is not a Christian says, "Well, she (or he) goes to church on Sundays; she has that marvelous religious side. In fact, that's one of the things I love most about her. She's got a wonderful spirituality that I really appreciate. And then there are all the other things we have in common."

But the problem is that being a Christian is not a compartment of who we are. It isn't our religious drawer where God belongs, which we open up on Sundays and holidays and at our weekly Bible study. We are either entirely Christian or we are not Christian. To marry someone who is a Christian is to join yourself with someone who at their deepest level is a Christian. Jesus is everywhere in that one's life, if they really know him. Marriages that don't take that seriously end up with tremendous pain, because each partner finds themselves becoming one with someone with whom they have nothing in common at the deepest level.

God is like that. He is love at the deepest level. It is not part of who he is, it is who he is. Therefore, the argument of John is that we must love each other, or we can't take God seriously as he is.

John makes two points here: Love comes from God, and, by implication, it does not come from anywhere else. All love that exists comes from God. You may have had the experience of driving down Middlefield Road into south Palo Alto when the coffee shop at Loma Verde is roasting its coffee. It is remarkable how much the aroma of the coffee roasting in that one little building spreads if the wind is blowing right. All over south Palo Alto, you're aware of the coffee roasting at this shop because the aroma is so strong. A little bit of it goes a long way.

Love is like that. God invests willing disciples with the capacity to love-in any church perhaps only a small minority have learned how deeply God loves them. These ones give up their defensiveness and become

vulnerable, laying down their lives for others. And having just a few people like that makes it possible for everyone else to love. Love comes from God, and not from anyone else. But many people are the beneficiaries of the faith of a few who let God teach them to love.

God is love at his heart, and because of that we should love each other. The upshot of John's first point is this: There may be those who don't feel the primacy of the call to love, who don't recognize that God has the right to tell us to care for people we're not attracted to, who don't even occasionally recognize their inadequacy in love and wrestle with it, who find themselves able to live "Christian" lives that are all about themselves. They are in effect saying, "I love God because it's paid off so well. I feel better emotionally in my religion. It has cured all the difficult relational problems I used to have. It has put me in touch with the right sort of people. My Christian faith has done so much for me." But if these people don't feel some compulsion to get outside of themselves and invest themselves in other people, then they don't understand who God is. "Everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God...." If we feel free to be selfish, there is a disconnect someplace. No Christian is perfect at expressing love, but getting outside of ourselves and being invested in someone else is required of our relationship with him. This is who he is by nature.

God loves the unlovely

The second time we run into the phrase "love one another" in this passage is in verses 9-10: "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." Verse 9 and 10 are parallel to each other. Verse 9 says this is how love was manifested, or shown among us; verse 10 says this is what love is. Then they both highlight the Father's sending his Son, the extraordinary expense that he went to, tearing his heart apart as for the first time in eternity Father and Son experienced separation from one another. God is love, and now we read of his love in action. What does he do? How does love show itself? It expresses itself in this giving of a life for the beloved.

So we should love one another, John argues for the second time. Verse 11 speaks of the gift of Christ: "Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another." What is implied here is that it was sacrifice for sinners that was at the heart of the giving of the Son. Those who were dead in their sins were given life. Those who were guilty were given a sacrifice to pay the cost of their guilt. If we love only attractive people, we haven't learned. God did not send his Son for people who were already in love with him, who were alive and growing and vital, who were making great progress anyway and just needed a little boost along the way. There weren't any such people. God sent his Son for people who were dead and made them alive, for those who were guilty and made them clean. And the call for us as his children and his followers is to love people who aren't attractive, who aren't going to make our lives easier, who aren't going to add to our stature. The experience of loving unlovely people is the best way to remind us of who we are. We are also the unlovely ones who received exactly that sort of love from God.

Reading these verses, I was reminded of what Jesus once said to a man who was his host: "When you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends, your brothers or relatives, or your rich neighbors; if you do, they may invite you back and so you will be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed. Although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous" (Luke 14:12-14). The banquet Jesus is describing here is an apt metaphor for life. Do we seek out people who might pay us back? Do we love only people who are very likely to love us? Do we befriend folks whose friendship will be to our advantage? God didn't. He loved people who were dying and lost. He sent his Son for those who needed cleansing. He sent his Son to give life to the dead. So John's argument is, "If God loved us that way, we ought to love one another that way."

Do we know the Lord as he is? Do we see ourselves as we are? If so, then the call to love one another makes more and more sense. Love is risky and hard. It demands too much of us. It veers out of control. It hurts. But that's who God is, and that's what we needed from him. There is no real Christianity without a radical sense of the call to love one another.

Making God visible

The third time we encounter the phrase "love one another" is in verse 12: "No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us." Verse 12 is very provocative, it seems to me. John makes an announcement: No one has ever seen God. And a couple of clauses later he says God's love is made complete in us. Both of these statements raise fascinating questions. How is it possible that God's love is not complete? What is incomplete about God's love? And the statement "No one has ever seen God" is certainly true, but what is he implying?

He is implying this: There are all kinds of things we can aim at in life, all kinds of purposes we can adopt, all kinds of visions that can impel us forward. But most of them aren't worth the effort.

The other day I had a long conversation with a man who has spent all his life racing thoroughbred horses and helping others buy them and race them. He was talking about the beauty and fragility of the horses, the excitement of the race, the electricity of the gambling environment, about never knowing which blood lines are going to produce a winner and which won't. He was well-to-do and well-respected, and had all the trappings that went with a fast-paced world. But I remember thinking at the end of the conversation, is that all there is? Is thoroughbred racing enough to give oneself to for a lifetime?

What John is saying in verse 12 is that we can choose, if we love one another, to do the most exciting things there are, to be engaged in the most remarkable enterprise imaginable. God has never been seen. But if we love one another, the invisible God becomes visible in our love! And incomplete love that wants to express itself in creation is being allowed to express itself in our love for one another. What could be more worth living for than this: that the royal Master of the entire universe gets to make himself known, that the love of God that longs to express itself in creation is being made complete in our experience? How are you going to find a higher calling than that?

This is life that is really worth living, John is saying. Let's love one another, because God is love, because he sent his Son for sinners like us, and because there is no adventure in life more worth having. With all the risks, the fears, and the potential for getting hurt, it's worth it. We were made for love, and even the hardest-hearted person alive knows it's true deep inside. We were made to be loved by God and to express that love to other people.

"Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God."

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