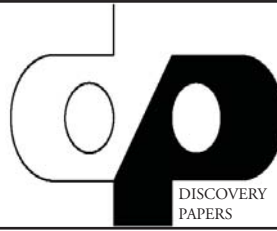


HE FIRST LOVED US

SERIES: IN HIM IS NO DARKNESS AT ALL



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1 John 4:7-21
6th Message
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Indelible Grace Music is a group of young musicians in Nashville. They are reviving old hymns and poems of faith, giving the lyrics new tunes, new voices to sing them, and new instruments to energize them. They say on their website, “We believe that this theological poetry is supremely suited for expressing the seeming paradoxes of the faith that drive us to worship. Our prayer is that Jesus would be made more beautiful and believable, and we have found few things better suited for this than hymns.”¹

It may be that paradox and poetry come to their highest point in a three-word phrase found in 1 John: “God is love.” This reality makes us worshippers. It has done so in every age, in every language—in Latin, in King James English, in African tribal dialects; in song, prayer, preaching, meditation. The declaration that God is love calls us to worship.

The letter 1 John is a polemic against false teachers, and twice so far John has given an extended exhortation to love, in chapter 2 and in chapter 3. In chapter 2 he notes that love is a commandment. It is an old commandment, and it is a renewed commandment: Love one another. In chapter 3 we learned that love establishes us as distinct from the world; those who love are not like Cain who slew his brother.

Now in chapter 4 we have some of the most sublime insights in the Bible. Love commends itself because it is the very nature of God. Our hearts are captured, our lives transformed. God is love. In love poured out, he sent his Son to us to atone for our sins.

God Is Love

1 John 4:7-12:

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 are directed to love one another both at the beginning of this text and near the end. In verse 7 he says, “Let us love one another, for love comes from God.” In verse

11, “Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.”

A life-changing encounter with God challenges us to turn from self-centeredness. All of our self-serving demands, our rights and ruffled feathers, our finger-pointing and prejudice, make sense if we are looking in a mirror, if we are the most important thing in our universe. But none of them make sense when our gaze is filled with the living God. Let us love each other. We ought to love each other as the beneficiaries of love, as those who know God, who is love himself.

Love comes from God because he is *himself* love. It is his very nature, it is essential to him. There is no aspect or action of God that is not filled with and surrounded by love.

We enter the mystery of the Trinity in saying that God is love. A unity of three Persons extending back beyond the first day of creation, before anything was made, God existed in love—the Father, Son, and Spirit, each one giving of himself generously and receiving from the other gratefully. Unending appreciation, full of delight—God is love.

God’s love is never capricious or absent.

His love has no limits;

His grace has no measure.

His pow’r has no boundary known unto men.

For out of his infinite riches in Jesus,

He giveth, and giveth, and giveth again!²

Even when he is speaking sternly about what is required of us, even when he seems silent and distant, he loves us. Even when his purity blinds our eyes and we feel we need to turn away, he still loves us.

In human relationships, love can make you crazy. It can crush your spirit. Love vocabularies can sometimes be used as a mask for selfish hunger. Statements of love sometimes precede abuse in human relationships. But we must be sure of this: “God is light; in him there is no darkness at all” (1 John 1:5). God’s love for us is always and only a source of blessing.

Twice in these verses we note that God sent his Son—love by nature will give itself away. In verse 9, “This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world..” In humility the Son was sent into a world that was not worthy of him. And in verse 10

it says, “God...loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.” He sent him to suffer and die for sinners. So love poured out humbles itself and sacrifices itself. The Son was sent into the world, the Son was sent as an atoning sacrifice.

The Gnostics refused a world in which the Incarnation could exist. They were certain that God could not enter a world like ours. Their deity always stays at a distance. But the Biblical gospel insists that from his conception in Mary’s womb to his birth in a cave in Bethlehem to his death on a cross, the man Jesus was the divine Son. God does not keep his distance. Paul says that Jesus,

“Being in very nature God,
did not consider equality with God something to
be grasped,
but made himself nothing,
taking the very nature of a servant,
being made in human likeness.”

(Philippians 2:6-7.)

In verse 12 we read, “No one has ever seen God....” He is not visible except when he is present in human beings. But as Jesus has risen and ascended into heaven, we don’t see God anywhere physically present in the world except in the church. “No one has ever seen God; *but if we love one another*, God lives in *us* and his love is made complete in us” (italics added). And so God is love, in himself, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. He pours himself out, sending his Son into this world as an atoning sacrifice, and finally *we* become the vessels by which God’s love is expressed in the world.

John Perkins, a modern prophet serving among the urban poor, has argued persuasively that the most effective witnesses are not those who give gifts from a distance, but those who move into the community. Drugs, crime, and poor schools are a much more serious problem, requiring me to get involved, when they occur in my neighborhood. Incarnation is love in action. “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.”

We ask the questions posed by Jesus’ incarnation: to what extent are we willing to be humbled? To what extent do we give up our status and our protections and our security? Are we willing to spend ourselves for somebody else? Do we merely hope that the needy receive justice and mercy, or do we spend ourselves for another’s sake?

We’ve learned from a description of the Father and the Son. Now we will encounter the ministry of the Holy Spirit.

We in Him and He in Us

Verses 13-16:

We know that we live in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit. And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world. If anyone acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God, God lives in him and he in God. And so we know and rely on the love God has for us.

God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in him.

The Gnostics spoke of a merely human Jesus—one who told beautiful stories and articulated challenging ideas. But John is very clear. When the Holy Spirit is present—the Spirit of God, who makes worship possible, who grants understanding, who takes the reality of God and penetrates our life—he will speak of Jesus as God the Son, made flesh to save the world. Jesus said this: when the Holy Spirit comes, “He will bring glory to me....” (John 16:14). The work of the Spirit is to magnify Christ. If anyone acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God, God lives in him and he in God. Where the Spirit is present, the Lord Jesus is raised up. The truth about him is declared and believed.

Let me also observe that we may not reverse the language of this text and claim that love is God. The idea is familiar to us—recall the Beatles: “All you need is love.”³ And, “What the world needs now is love, sweet love.”⁴ This is a bit like having faith in faith; the world can be made right by a call for good intentions and a warm regard for love.

The first summer I lived in the Bay Area was 1967, the famous Summer of Love in San Francisco. I was a freshman in college. Human transformation was going to be based on psychedelic drugs and the wearing of flowers. But no human effort can save the lost or generate sacrificial love. We need the Holy Spirit himself to make God present in our hearts and lives and our experience; and when the Spirit is present, Jesus is magnified.

In Love There Is No Fear

Verses 17-19:

In this way, love is made complete among us so that we will have confidence on the day of judgment, because in this world we are like him. There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love.

We love because he first loved us.

Abusive parents and violent romances can create terrible confusion—a longing to be touched and welcomed by a person you also fear. But we must be sure that divine love, perfect love, will never be hurtful and need never be feared. We have nothing to fear in the final judgment: “We

have one who speaks to the Father in our defense—Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world.” (1 John 2:1b-2.)

And so we make our way in the world as fearless people. We may get hurt, we may be misunderstood, we could very well be taken for granted, we might spend ourselves, there might be loneliness, there might be questions—but there will never be punishment. There will never be an evil outcome. We know that because God loves us.

Loving God Means Loving Our Brother

The final verses in chapter 4, 20-21:

If anyone says, “I love God,” yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen. And he has given us this command: Whoever loves God must also love his brother.

False teachers in John’s day (and ours) claim that there are religious exceptions to the rule of love—because I am so close to God and I know exotic secrets and wear special robes, I am free from the responsibility to love my brother. In fact, no one can say, “I love God,” and not love his brother. The command is absolute; whoever loves God must also love his brother.

In conclusion, we recall that love flows from understanding, even though imperfectly, that God himself is love. Knowing this, we fall to our knees in worship. We are those who are swept up in the fact that he is love and therefore we cannot help but love each other. And perhaps we simply love because he first loved us.

NOTES

1. <http://www.igracemusic.com/about/index.htm>.
2. Annie Johnson Flint, text of *He Giveth More Grace*, © 1941, renewed 1969, Lillenas Publishing Co.
3. John Lennon, *All You Need is Love*, © 1967, EMI Records.
4. Hal David, lyrics of *What the World Needs Now is Love*, © 1965.

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