

28 April 2024

Judgment, Fear, Punishment, Love

1 John 4:7-21

Today we read from the first letter of John, chapter 4, verses 7-21.

⁷Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. ⁸Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. ⁹God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. ¹⁰In 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. ¹¹Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. ¹²No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.

¹³By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit. ¹⁴And we have seen and do testify that the Father has sent his Son as the Savior of the world. ¹⁵God abides in those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God, and they abide in God. ¹⁶So 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. ¹⁷Love 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. ¹⁸There 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. ²⁰Those 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. ²¹The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.

This passage begins with what may be the most familiar Bible verse of all, so familiar that people may not even know it's in scripture: "God is love." We've heard this so often, seen it on so many framed cross-stitch hangings or whatever you call that thing where you burn the edges of a hunk of wood and hang it on the wall, that we may not have ever thought about how odd it is. This doesn't say "God loves" but "God *is* love." Love is not a thing that God does, but who God is. It doesn't say "God is *loving*" – that is, that love is one of the attributes of God, alongside other attributes like wisdom, strength, or justice. Love isn't an attribute of God; it's God's identity. This has ramifications. If God *is* love, then God cannot be separated from love. Attributes can be. You can say, "That man is wise, but he sometimes does dumb things," and that's not a contradiction. Attributes aren't always. But you can't say God is love, but he sometimes does hateful things. That would be to say that God is sometimes not God.

Moreover, if love is God's very identity, then that means that all the *attributes* of God are subordinate to love. For instance, we say that God is just, but if justice and love come into conflict, then identity trumps attribute. God is not always just. But when God is unjust, it's on the side of love. There are examples of that all through scripture – such as the parables of the Prodigal Son or the Laborers in the Field. "Love trumps justice" is the theme of the entire book of Hosea. You can do the same thing with every other quality that we attribute to God. God is gentle, but not always. God is patient, but not always. God answers prayer, but not always. But God is love; always.

Now I've already suggested this, but I feel as if I need one thing clear. Saying that God is love is not the same thing as saying that God is "nice." Love sometimes involves being strict, sometimes involves punishment, sometimes involves stepping back. There's a reason that the most common metaphor for God is that of a parent: because parental love involves all those things. Parents who never discipline their children are not demonstrating love. Love wants the best for the person that is loved, and raising children without any limits is a recipe for raising a miserable and narcissistic adult. Similarly, parents who hover over their children, who rush in to fight every battle for them or clear every obstacle from their path may think they are being loving, but again love wants the best for the other, so sometimes love steps back to let the other screw up and learn something. God's like that, too. Sometimes God punishes, *because* God loves us. Sometimes God leaves us to learn our own hard lessons, *because* God loves us. None of that means that God has stopped loving us, because that can't happen. God is love.

So now let's look back at our scripture and examine a few specific verses. *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.* Again, this passage may be so familiar to us that we don't recognize how radical it is. I know no way to interpret this except to say that the one sure sign that someone is aligned with God is whether that person loves. That's it. Not whether that person is a Christian or believes the Apostle's Creed or has been baptized. The loving Hindu or atheist is closer to God than the hateful Christian. But wait, is there even such a thing as a Christian who doesn't love? And that's a fair question. There shouldn't be. All I can say for sure is that there are people who claim the name of Christian who don't. Twenty years ago, when I was still a Baptist pastor, the church I served was picketed by the Westboro Baptist Church. You probably remember that lot. They were the ones who used to travel around the country with signs saying, "God hates fags." So the day before the scheduled protest, I went out to the sign in the church's front yard and put up this message: *Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. 1 John 4:8.*

Now, verse 12: *No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.* It's sometimes hard to worship a God we cannot picture. Our own minds work best with concrete images, with data from our own senses, but we don't usually get that with God, do we? We may be able to tell ourselves, intellectually, that this is only to be expected. God created all that is and so, by definition, is beyond all that is. We should no more be able to see or touch or smell God than a video game character should be able to see, touch, or smell the graphic designer who invented him. It's still hard, though. We want to picture God. Well, try this: what does love look like, sound like, smell like, feel like? If we know what it's like to love, then we can visualize God. *If we love one another, God lives in us.*

Verses 16 and 17: *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.* As I said earlier, saying that God is love is not the same thing as saying that God's an old softie. As little as some of us may like it, the New Testament is fairly clear that we shall face judgment. God allows us to screw up our lives, if we're determined to do so, and God lets us face the consequences of our own actions. But let me say two things about that. First, as the verse above makes clear, if we love then we can face judgment with boldness, without anxiety. We're fine. And second, if God *is* love instead of just being loving along with other attributes, then every judgment, every punishment, is for the purpose of restoring us. The punishments of a God

who is love will neither involve gratuitous cruelty or be final. God never gives up on us. Love doesn't do that, and God is love.

One more verse, verse 18: *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.* About ten years ago I drove to Kansas City to spend a day with my friend Mark. Mark and his twin brother Mike were my closest friends through high school: like me, Baptist missionary kids in Singapore. Mark had terminal cancer and would die a few months after my visit, but I was there on a good day, and we had a lot of time to talk in between his naps. Mark had long since abandoned the church, which was adding a new level of irritation to his illness, because most of his Christian friends were laser-focused on getting him to say the right words to get into heaven. Mark said he even thought about just saying the words to get rid of them, but he had too much integrity for that. Mark wasn't afraid, though. He said, "I do think there's something out there. I don't know what, but I'm curious."

Mark had a hospice nurse who came out to visit him regularly, and as we talked that day, Mark said suddenly, "You know what my nurse told me? She said that she had had some patients who were terrified of death – and the worst ones were nearly always Christian pastors."

"Whoa," I said. "That doesn't make any sense."

Mark said, "I've been thinking about it ever since she told me, and I think I understand. These are pastors who've been telling their people that they have to make sure they have everything right in order to get to heaven – believe all the right things, agree with all the right opinions, hate all the right things. But now they're dying themselves, and all they can think about is whether they have it all right themselves. What if they have one thing wrong? Their God doesn't leave much room for error. And so they're afraid."

What I'm saying today, and what I think John was saying 1900 years ago, is that being aligned with God isn't about being right. It's about love. It's about whether we love, and if we keep growing toward perfection in love, then we do not ever need to be afraid. *There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear.*

* * *

Like my friend Mark, I left the church I grew up in, but unlike him I got lucky and stumbled into United Methodism, where to my wonder I found pastors who were different from the ones that Mark described, the ones who preach fear. Especially my first senior pastor, Karen Ebert. She preached this passage from 1 John a lot. Even when she was theoretically preaching from a different passage, she pretty much always came back to "God is love." Karen had a picture on her desk that a child at church had drawn of her preaching, with a word balloon coming from her mouth saying, "God is love." Even the kids knew where Karen would always end up. Karen also died of cancer, about a year before my friend Mark did. She also wasn't afraid. The bishop appointed me her replacement, so as I moved into Karen's office, her husband and I went through her books. I kept a few of them, such as her Greek New Testament. I mean I had one, but everyone needs one for home and office, right? Well, a year or so after her death I was looking something up in her copy and I passed by 1 John 4. There was one of those little post-it notes on that page. It said, "God is love! Think of me. Love, Karen."

So that's the goal: to be remembered like that. Live this week in such a way that people will see God in you. Hint: God is love.