

April 28, 2024
“Indwelling Love”
1 John 4:7-21 / John 15:1-6
Pastor Tim

SING: *I live within you, deep in your heart, O Love / I live within you, rest now in me*

Well, we're back to love again this morning, Calvary.

I've said it before and I know I'll say it again many times – as Desmond Tutu said to Amy and her classmates in seminary, that all preaching really, and ultimately, boils down – or at least should – to love. Love, love, love.

It's about love. If we are to take the Gospel, the good news, seriously, we have to take love seriously.

In our faith, in our hearts, in our minds, in our bodies, in our relationships, in our communities, in our churches, in our politics, in our daily lives, we are meant to be about – above all else – the business of love. The study of love. The practice of love. The pursuit of love. Divine love, extravagant love, unconditional love, what the Greeks call “agape” love.

Love is the means and the end of our spiritual journeys. And so we're talking about love AGAIN this morning because, for some reason, scripture keeps pointing us in that direction.

Take the first letter of John – not to be confused with the Gospel of John, though there is good reason to believe they may have been authored by the same person given the similarities in language, style and content. 1st John is referred to as a letter or “epistle,” as with the works of the apostle, Paul; though it's not really written in that style.

This is a text perhaps most famously known for one verse in particular, verse 18: “There is no fear in love, rather perfect love casts out fear;” – and it continues – “for fear relates to punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love.”

That verse is a powerful reminder for all of us that the opposite of love is not hate, but fear. Love ALONE can cast out fear. When and where fear takes root in our faith, our hearts, our

minds, our bodies, our relationships, our communities, our churches, our politics, our daily lives, love is compromised. Forsaken.

That verse is also a powerful reminder that what we are seeking, spiritually speaking, is perfection in love. Perfect love. What Methodism's founder, John Wesley, described as "moving onto perfection" – with God's grace.

But 1st John has a lot more to say about love:

"Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God."

"Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love."

"God no one has ever seen. Yet if we love one another, God lives in us, and God's love is made complete in us."

"God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them."

This is what we're talking about when we say "indwelling love." Loving one another – and Jesus clearly includes loving ourselves – is a reflection of the fact that God's love is in us. That God lives in us because God is Love itself. And that love, in fact, is "made complete" in us WHEN we love one another, as we love ourselves.

"If someone says, 'I love God,' and hates their siblings, they are a liar; for those who do not love a sibling whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen."

We love God not by saying so, but by loving each other (and ourselves). Love is nothing without action, without hands and feet.

As Paul says in his letter to the Corinthian church, "If I speak in the tongues of humans and of angels but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal."

It's hard to hear each other, much less ourselves, much less the still, small voice of God within us, with so many noisy gongs and clanging cymbals. Amen? In the midst of so much fear-mongering and finger-pointing. In the midst of so many wolves in sheep's clothing –

false prophets, Jesus calls them. Those “who come to you in sheep’s clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves.”

“You will know them by their fruits,” he says.

And back to 1st John: “Yet IF we love ..., God lives in us, and God’s love is made complete in us.”

“God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.”

That, friends, is indwelling love – the same indwelling love Jesus is talking about in our reading from the Gospel of John. Part of the so-called “farewell discourses” through which Jesus begins preparing his disciples for life without him in the flesh. Through which he offers them comfort and assurance that they will not be alone.

“Abide in me as I abide in you.”

Abide in me as I abide in you. Abide in the Spirit as the Spirit abides in you. Abide in love – divine Love – as love abides in you. Indwelling love.

Note here that his instruction comes in the context of the last of Jesus’ seven “I am” statements spread throughout the Gospel of John – each evoking the name of God expressed to Moses in the burning bush, Exodus 3:14: “I am who I am”:

- I am the Bread of Life
- I am the Light of the World
- I am the Door
- I am the Good Shepherd
- I am the Resurrection and the Life
- I am the Way and the Truth and the Life
- And in this case, I am the Vine

Now I need to say here that there is plenty of scholarly skepticism about whether Jesus actually made these statements, said these things about himself. Again, as we’ve noted before, it’s the same skepticism applied more broadly to the Gospel of John because it is SO different from the synoptic gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke.

And this is one of the ways it's different, with Jesus making claims about himself that he NOT ONLY doesn't make in the other gospels, but that seem out of character for the Jesus we find in those gospels.

Be that as it may, we get this rich agricultural imagery of vine and branches: Jesus presented as the vine, as an ongoing source of strength and support; the disciples as the branches, growing and bearing the fruit of the vine; and God as the vinegrower, the gardener, who is Love itself, carefully tending to it all.

"Abide in me as I abide in you" – vine and branches. A beautiful and evocative description of intimate, life-giving, mutual, symbiotic relationship – mystical relationship, spiritual union – with Jesus, who embodied divine love. With God who is Love. Indwelling love.

The metaphor of vine and branches is about mutuality, and it's ultimately about bearing fruit. "You will know them by their fruits."

Bearing fruit is reflecting in our lives and to the world around us the love of God, the Love that IS God, made known to us in Jesus.

"Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, ..."

Just as the branch cannot bear love by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in love. Again, indwelling love.

The practice of pruning is simply the practice of enabling more fruit to bear. From John: "Every branch that bears fruit God prunes to make it bear more fruit."

Pruning is removing that which keeps us from love – of God, of each other, of ourselves. Removing that which turns us from love – from God, from each other, from ourselves.

John's text goes, and our reading in fact concludes, with this doozy of a verse: "Whoever does NOT abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned."

What do we do with a verse like that?

We COULD just ignore it, of course, pretend we didn't see or hear it. LA LA LA LA LA LA. I've been there. Many times. Maybe you have, too?

We COULD, in keeping with the scholarly skepticism I mentioned before, dismiss these words as simply not coming from the mouth of the authentic, historical Jesus. Or at least not indicative of the Jesus we know as the embodiment of divine Love – in life and in death.

Or we COULD do what the Christian church writ large has long done and continues to do, which is to take such a verse literally – connecting it to the notion of eternal judgment and the threat of eternal hellfire. Bear fruit or else!

For starters, that approach fails the love test. “Bear fruit or else” is about fear, not love. A wolf in sheep's clothing – disguised as love, but love conditional. And as we have already heard, only perfect love, unconditional love, casts out fear.

If it's not about love, it's not about the Gospel. It IS NOT good news!

And for that same reason, let me also do some theological contesting here with the author of 1st John. Starting with verse 10: “In this is love, not that we loved God but that God loved us and sent God's own Son to be the means of forgiveness for our sins.” That's a translation from Wilda Gafney's “A Women's Lectionary for the Whole Church.”

Typical translations say it more like this, “In this is love, not that we loved God but that God loved us and sent God's son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins.” That is the theology of traditional church teaching known as “substitutionary atonement.”

I cannot speak for you. And I am not here to tell you what and what not to believe. I don't understand that to be my job as a pastor.

You may or may not believe in the doctrine of “substitutionary atonement,” and I know many in the Church do. But as I have said before, for me, that theological grounding flies in the face of the God I know as the God of unconditional love. The God who loves like I

struggle and aspire to. It flies in the face of the God, our God, who desires mercy, not sacrifice.

That's not to say we have no need for atonement and reparation in our lives and in our relationships, making right. Of course we do. That's not to say we aren't prone to sin – failure to love God, each other, ourselves. Of course we are. Of course we all are!

But lurking underneath the theological notion of “substitutionary atonement” is – for me – fear, not love. It's the “or else” that Jesus had to die on the cross, had to be sacrificed, OR ELSE humanity, all of us, would eternally fall prey to sin, remain eternally damned, eternally banished from the reach of God's love.

The author of 1st John goes on in verses 14 and 15: “And we have seen and so testify that God has sent the Son of God as the Savior of the world. God abides in those who confess,” – WHO CONFESS – “that Jesus is the Son of God, and they abide in God.”

Against the long and entrenched tradition of the Christian church, I simply refuse to accept the theological implication here – and elsewhere – that God ONLY abides in those who confess Jesus in one way or another. Who believe certain things about Jesus. Who are Christians, say.

We are ALL made in God's image. I believe that with all my heart. And so we are made by Love, in Love, for Love. And so I also believe, as we've been exploring this morning and as I believe the full arc of the Biblical witness attests, that God abides in ALL those who love, and they in God. That is the good news. That is indwelling love.

I fully acknowledge that some of you may not agree with me on that count. And that's OK. I fully acknowledge that the Christian tradition, so much of our liturgies and rituals and hymns, are steeped in an understanding and in the language of “substitutionary atonement.” It is a given in most Christian contexts.

I hope and pray that Calvary can be a space for us to have these conversations when we may not agree theologically or politically. So consider the dialogue open in general. But not right now!

For now, I want to take us back to the literal understanding of withering branches thrown away when they don't bear fruit, thrown into the fire. Beyond failing the love test, the other issue with such an approach is that it fails to understand, of course, that the metaphor of vine and branches (whether or not Jesus introduced it) is just that – a metaphor. One that would have been very familiar to many of Jesus' early followers.

It makes sense within the metaphor. Branches that fail to bear fruit ARE trimmed or cut off as part of the pruning process to ... what? To enable more fruit to grow. And those branches were indeed thrown away, thrown into the fire. That's just the agricultural process.

We all know what it's like to feel like withered branches. We have days like that. We have weeks and months like that maybe, longer stretches throughout our lives. You may be in a stretch like that now.

Feeling disconnected from the vine, the very source of life and love. Disconnected from love – unable, for any number of reasons we may not even be aware of, to receive love for ourselves. Unable, for whatever reasons, to give love to others. Distracted. Depressed. Disheartened. Dispirited. Depleted. Demoralized. Demonized. Dejected. Defeated.

Let's be honest: such disconnection, whether we name or recognize it as such, is punishment all by itself. It's punishment enough.

But the beauty and gift of divine love – UNCONDITIONAL LOVE premised on mercy, not sacrifice – is that it's constantly pruning, remaking, reshaping, constantly calling us all back to the vine. God, the Constant Gardener, insists that withered branches can bear fruit again. That's the good news of which Jesus came to remind us!

And with the gift of such love comes the steady invitation from God – offered through Jesus, but not ONLY through Jesus – to love like that.

We are able to love, to know love, to receive love, to give love, because God, our Creator, is Love itself. Because we, each of us, made and remade by Love, in Love, for Love. Because God loves. Because God loved Creation first, in all its goodness, from the very beginning.

The more we ALLOW such love to ABIDE in us, to intentionally, literally make space for such love to DWELL in us, to make a home in our faith, in our hearts and minds and bodies, the less FEARFUL we become. The more love we have to give.

The MORE LIKELY and CONSISTENTLY we are to respond to the world around us with love – in our relationships with family and friends and co-workers and neighbors and “enemies,” in our communities, in our churches, in our politics, in our daily lives. To bear fruit.

The Christian life, the spiritual life – its means and its end – is about the study, the practice, the pursuit of divine love. Love unconditional. Love perfected. Indwelling love.

Abide in me as I abide in you. Abide in the Spirit as the Spirit abides in you. Abide in love as love abides in you.

SING: *I live within you, deep in your heart O Love / I live within you, rest now in me*

May it be so.