**A Sermon for DaySpring**

By Eric Howell

*“God’s Perfect Love”*

1 John 4:7-21

April 29, 2018

God is love.

It is one of the most profound sentences ever written, or it is just a nice sentiment that sounds good. But what good does it do me? God may be love, and that’s great, but that leaves the question of how do I access that love? I can’t see God. Most of the time I am doing well just to have any sense that God is really present, much less to experience divine love.

The Epistle of 1 John tells more of the story: The way we know God is love is that God sent his Son into the world that we might live through him. He is the atoning sacrifice for us, the way our sins are forgiven, and it is by him that God abides in those who confess Jesus is the Son of God. God abides in them and they abide in God. This love of God gives us boldness on the day of judgment. This perfect love casts out fear.

God is love, and that changes everything, but still, it seems pretty distant from my life.

We could expect the instruction to then be: since God loved us so much we also ought to love God. We are told to love God all through scripture. In 1 John the way we are told we love God is by loving one another. God loved us so we love our brothers and our sisters. And now maybe we have something to work with. The spiritual takes shapes in the material.

Remember, John’s letter is really thinking hard about what it means that God became incarnate in Christ. The physical reality of Jesus of Nazareth is very important to John, it seems, because there were some people who were talking about Jesus as if he hadn’t really existed as a human. They said things like, “Well, he was like a man, but not really. It felt like he was really here, but he couldn’t have been.” They said things like that. All the while, John is like, no, no, no, he was really body, flesh and blood. I touched the flesh; I saw the blood. God really became a man, hard as that is to understand. Love took human form in Christ and takes human form in us too.

John thought a lot about that. He thought a lot about how no one has seen God, but we do see each other. It’s like God as human caused John to rethink what it means to be human. He looked at humanity with new eyes. He saw it in a new light. In John’s eyes, when he looked around at his brothers and sisters, they were sacred.

Not everyone has this vision. You can look around and see other people as all kinds of things: competitors to beat, annoyances to avoid, threats to defend, audience members for your performance or performers for your amusement, distractions for your spirituality, bodies for your pleasure.

But John is thinking about this in a new way. About the invisible, eternal, transcendent God taking flesh. And then it starts to fall in place. God is love. To love God is to love our brothers and sisters. That’s how we can love God, by loving one another. It becomes clear to John and so he writes, “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.” John draws an intimate, personal, bold connection between our relationship with God in the heavens above and our brothers and sisters in the flesh here below. He wasn’t the first.

Remember Amos? Amos was an Old Testament prophet who said the same thing, this connection between loving God and loving brothers and sisters. In Amos 5, God rejects the worship of Israel. Take away from me your songs, your incense makes my nostrils burn, your sacrifices make my stomach turn, your music hurts my ears. Silence your sermons. Mute your music. Take from me your worship rituals until you start loving the people around you. The sound of that love? Justice rolling down like water. The sight of that love? Righteousness like a flowing stream. I think John must have thought about that, that we aren’t loving God if we aren’t loving our brothers and sisters.

Anytime we think about brothers and sisters we might think about family strife, about how hard it is sometimes to love the people closest to us. If we think about that, we might remember Cain and Abel, the first siblings. It didn’t go well. Both were trying to please God until Cain gets mad at his brother. He whacks Abel, killing his brother. “Cain, where’s your brother Abel?” Cain dodges the question: Am I my brother’s keeper? The answer isn’t given, but the implied response is surely: Yes! Yes, you are that, or at least you aren’t your brother’s judge and executioner. The human story did not begin with brotherly love.

Maybe that’s why it’s so important to John. Because it’s hard. Sometimes it’s not, but sometimes it is and everyone, everyone I know at least, has a place in their lives where it’s hard. When we read brothers and sisters, some people think about a family member; others think of someone in their community; some people their fellow countrymen. In the New Testament, brothers and sisters often meant fellow members of the church; some people might think more broadly and think about every person on earth that share a kinship as humans: North and South Koreans, Palestinians and Jews, Republicans and Democrats. I’d say Bears and Aggies, but let’s not get carried away—each of us shares a kinship with one another and so this call to love extends to all humanity, but is always particular to the person in front of you.

Nice idea, except we have lost vital connection with one another. It’s not just that people spend more time alone in their cars commuting to work and more and more time in front of televisions and their little screens, though that’s true. Maybe I’m expressing some nostalgia for a time that never really was, when you could walk down the sidewalk and not get plowed over by a student looking at their phone. Where have all the front porches gone and where have the evenings spent with neighbors on those porches gone? We don’t know our neighbors. How can we love them if we do not know them? How can we know them if we do not see them? The spiritual takes shape in the physical. The universal takes shape in the particular.

For Thomas Merton, the sacredness of his brothers and sisters was an epiphany. He famously wrote: “In Louisville, at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the center of the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all those people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers… I have the immense joy of being man, a member of a race in which God himself became incarnate. As if the sorrows and stupidities of the human condition could overwhelm me, now I realize what we all are. And if only everybody could realize this! But it cannot be explained. There is no way of telling people that they are all walking around shining like the sun.”

We love God who we do not see by loving who we do see. For Merton, I think for John, this love makes possible and grows from vital connections. The spiritual takes the physical. The universal takes the particular. I don’t think we realize how far we’ve drifted from the intimacy that makes this love possible. We’ve forgotten how to be human.

The loss of our connection goes even deeper than just relationships between people. It goes to our relationship with all of creation. That’s the most obvious connection we have lost, and most of us have, pretty much fully. Food is the tell. Think about your last meal. Imagine bowing your head to pray before that meal. In that prayer, could you have thanked God specifically for everything in front of you? Do you know even what it’s made of? Is it real food? Do you know what animal the meat came from? Where the animal lived? Do you know where the vegetables were grown, or what baker kneaded the bread and from what grain? If you’re like most people you have little to no idea. You just know the food appeared: the can opened, the waiter handed you a plate, the microwave produced it. You unwrapped it. We share in common an experience of having lost connection with the food, and with the natural world in which we participate that has made it possible for us to have food.

It was not always that way for everyone. I’m not just thinking back nostalgically to the 1950s or even 1850s, though those were times when people had a much more direct connection with their squash, tomatoes, fish, and venison. I’m thinking back hundreds of years to the little town of Assisi in which Francis saw creation with a vision that invites us to see the whole world with intimate love. His connection with creation wasn’t just out of necessity in a pre-modern world without grocery stores and take-out Chinese. It was contemplative worshipful participation. Francis, and other humans like him, invite us to take our place as creatures of God among other creatures whose lives are also gifts from the Divine Creator.

It’s not a sepia-toned romantic vision either. Francis suffered. The story goes that he came to a time when he was sick, was almost blind, and was in constant pain. He slept on a mat in a small hut near some of his friends. They tended to him as best they could, but he was uncomfortable all the time. Sleeping was hard and daytime was hard. It was while dealing with all of that that he arose one morning and composed a prayer, a song, called *The* *Canticle of the Creatures*.

The Prayer, most familiar to us as the hymn *All Creatures of Our God and King*, calls on all creation to give praise to God. The hymn adaptation reads, “All creatures of our God and King, lift up your voice and with us sing, alleluia. O burning sun with golden beams, and silver moon with softer gleam; O praise him, alleluia.” Its’ a beautiful hymn, calling on sun, moon, wind, water, fire to praise God. The hymn is beautiful but it shies away from Francis’ vision in one important way. For Francis it wasn’t, “O burning son with golden beams,” it was “brother sun.” It wasn’t “silver moon with softer gleam,” it was “sister moon.” It was “brother wind,” and “sister water.” Francis gives us a vision, not just of connection with all creation but of kinship with all creation as brothers and sisters in the family of God. It’s one part metaphor for sure, but it’s also a love he felt arising out of his connection with all creation. Francis is choir director of the cosmic choir, a family of praise lifting thanksgiving to our common Father, Creator, Life-Giver, Love. We have more brothers and sisters than we may have realized. In God’s world, the life of all creation is animated by the metaphysical energy of divine love. If we had eyes to see, everything is shining like the sun.

We prepare our hearts to come to the Table for the church’s Love Feast at which we encounter God whom we have not seen, in the fruit of creation that we have seen: bread made by grain and yeast and the hands that knead them, juice from grapes and the hands that crushed them. Let us love this bread. Let us love this cup. Let us love the ones who serve us. Let us love one another as we celebrate. Let us love our brothers and sisters who share kinship with us in shared creaturehood and through all of this, love God.

Everything God created reveals something of God’s goodness and love. Everyone God created reveals something of God’s goodness and love. This is hard to believe sometimes. So this must be our prayer, for God’s abiding grace in all things, those who love us and those who wish us harm, that in all things, in all ways, we will grow to love God with all our hearts, with all our souls, with all our strength. And let all things their creator bless, and worship him in humbleness. Praise the Father, praise the Son, praise the Spirit, three in one, my brothers and my sisters in holy love. Alleluia.

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