



# “Beloved Let Us Love One Another”

Text: 1 John 4:17-21

*a sermon by Kevin Fleming*

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FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH - EVANSVILLE, INDIANA

“Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love.”

These are the words of Scripture and they are the witness of the church. They have been such for over 2,000 years. And with those introductory words comes these words of instruction:

“Beloved, since God loved us so much,  
we also ought to love one another.”

These words have been the north star of the church and have guided our life and mission since the earliest day.

This is not the sermon whose title is given in the bulletin. We will move that sermon to another week. That sermon went out the window yesterday, when the events in Charlottesville took center stage.

On the campus of the University of Virginia, founded by Thomas Jefferson, whose thought and brilliance helped birth this nation, whose pen gave us the words:

“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.”

- on that noble ground, people with swastikas, brown shirts, paramilitary uniforms, and the robes of the Ku Klux Klan, met to proclaim their gospel of hate, anti-Semitism, bigotry, intolerance, and white supremacy.

“Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love.”

The images from Charlottesville stir painful and despicable memories from the past. People wearing arm bands and carrying flags of the Third Reich in a torch light procession brings back memories of others wearing arm bands and carrying flags in Berlin, saluting a man and a movement that saw the mass murder of:

- Between five and six million Jews
- More than three million Soviet prisoners of war
- More than two million Soviet civilians
- More than one million Polish civilians
- More than one million Yugoslav civilians
- About 70,000 men, women and children with mental and physical handicaps
- More than 200,000 gypsies
- and unknown numbers of political prisoners, resistance fighters, homosexuals and deportees.

Those images also brought back memories of a time, over a half-century ago, when people within our country fought for equal treatment and equal rights, and were met with fire hoses, attack dogs, hooded bands of church-going murderers, and forms of injustice and brutality that were appalling and inexcusable.

“Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love.”

That hatred exists in our country is no surprise. We have seen hatred in all its demonic and destructive forms since the day of our nation’s creation. When we are at our best, we argue and debate and work together to bring things to a sensible end. When we are at our worst, we demonize, and destroy, and devour each other. We spill each other’s blood and we claim that God is with our side of the argument and that God has abandoned those who oppose us.

We spread fear and distrust of the neighbor, the alien, the Muslim, the Jew, the homosexual, the lesbian, and anyone who isn’t just like us and looks like us and believes what we believe. We carefully teach our children to hate and fear, we teach it and teach it from year to year, we drum it and drum it in their dear little ears.

“There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reach perfection in love...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.”

Let us be clear: these harbingers of hate and messengers of malice, who attack peaceful people who differ with their position, those who seek the destruction of others because of their race or their religion, those who practice hatred of women, of gay, lesbian, bi-sexual, or transgendered people, those who intimidate and bully another, those

who would obscure and defame the image of God in which another human being is created – those who hold such views and practice such a philosophy, are not lovers or servants of God or of Jesus Christ. They are, in the fullness of the Bible’s use of the word, “anti-Christ.” They are against God and against Christ and it does not matter that they claim salvation, attend church, or any other superficial evidence often offered to assuage the charge of “anti-Christ.”

“Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love.”

One of the questions I was taught to ask myself when writing a sermon is, “Where is the good news?” In all honesty, it is hard to find good news to share this morning. This has been a horrific week – a week filled with threats of mass destruction, hatred, and violence.

But there is good news.

“Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another.”

This is the commandment of our God and of Christ.

“This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you.”<sup>1</sup>

God has commended to us a new way of living – the way of love. And the way of love is marked in this way:

Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends.<sup>2</sup>

Living with love for God and neighbor is not impossible. Living with love for God and neighbor is not “pie in the sky” nor is it Pollyanish. It is a legitimate way of life commended and commanded to us by God. It is the way that leads to true and authentic life. It is the way that leads to justice and peace. It is the way of God and God’s true and authentic people.

George Bernard Shaw originated the quote, though many of us remember it being said by a young Senator nearly fifty summers ago. The words are for us – here and now. Bernard Shaw wrote: “You see things, and you say ‘Why?’ But I dream things that never were, and I say, ‘Why not?’”

“Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another.”

The truth is that we have tried the way of hate, of fear, of division, of violence. We have tried intimidation and coercion and bullying and persecution. We have tried browbeating, maltreatment, and oppression. And it does not work.

Maybe it's time we give love a chance. Maybe it's time that we allow compassion to be at the heart of our behavior and conduct and our policies as a nation. Maybe it's time we demand genuine and valid moral leadership, grounded in compassion and love, of those we elect to lead us.

Martin Luther King, Jr., fifteen days after I was born, told us:  
Love is the only force capable of transforming an enemy into a friend. We never get rid of an enemy by meeting hate with hate; we get rid of an enemy by getting rid of enmity. By its very nature, love creates and builds up. Love transforms with redemptive power.

Ten years later, just a year before his death, he told us:  
And I say to you, I have also decided to stick with love, for I know that love is ultimately the only answer to mankind's problems. And I'm going to talk about it everywhere I go. I know it isn't popular to talk about it in some circles today. And I'm not talking about emotional bosh when I talk about love; I'm talking about a strong, demanding love. And I have seen too much hate. I've seen too much hate on the faces of sheriffs in the South. I've seen hate on the faces of too many Klansmen and too many White Citizens Councilors in the South to want to hate, myself, because every time I see it, I know that it does something to their faces and their personalities, and I say to myself that hate is too great a burden to bear. I have decided to love.

I beg you, sisters and brothers, in the face of such hatred and animosity,

“Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another.”

Pray for those outside the practice of love, for those who have rejected God and God's way of love, for those who mock and deride love as foolishness. Work for love, for justice, for fairness, for God's truth. Give yourself fully and completely to the way of God, which is the way of love.

For hatred is simply too great a burden to bear. Let us follow the way of God, the way of Christ, the way of love. It truly is the only answer to humanity's problems. Choose love.

For now and evermore. Amen.

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1) John 15:12-15

2) 1 Corinthians 13:4-8

3) Christmas Day message, 1957