



“The Easter People: 4. The Theology of Love”

Text: 1 John 4:7-21

a sermon by Kevin Fleming

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I suppose there are people who get a little antsy whenever the word “theology” is used. It begs follow up questions. “Whose theology?” “What type of theology?” “Is this theology biblically grounded?” The follow ups to the follow up are even more interesting. “Who best articulates this theology?” “It this systematic, exegetical, philosophical, process, or historical theology?” And it only gets worse.

“Theology,” when you tear the word apart, is literally, “God words.” We might think of it as “words about God.” At its most basic level, theology is the study of who God is and who God calls us to be. It should not be an intimidating or even a scary word. In every respect, it is like “geology” (the study of the earth’s physical structures), or “zoology” (the study of animals), or “archeology” (the study of human prehistory and history), or any of the other “-ologies” that are noble and worthy fields of study.

In truth, whenever we talk about God, we are doing some kind of theology and whatever we say about God is a theological statement. Therefore, we need to make sure that our theology is clearly stated, can stand up to questions, is informed by the Scriptures and the tradition, and – hopefully – draws us closer to God and closer to each other.

Before us this morning, is a passage from the First Letter of John that cannot but resonate in the hearts of those who hear it – believers or not. It is eloquent, informative, and prescriptive. It is wonderful theology. It is a theology of love.

The argument offered in First John is based on this statement:

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

God is love. It is a little statement that says much.

Let us be clear: there is a very real tendency to romanticize this little verse and make God into a supernatural teddy bear. God is certainly not that. Nor is God one dimensional. God is not like us. It was Voltaire that told us, that “In the beginning God created man in His own image, and man has been trying to repay the favor ever since.”

God is complex and multi-dimensional. God is far greater than can be captured in even our most considered words. God is deeper than our understanding, higher than our morals, more present than we can be, and more just than we can dream of being. And that’s just for starters.

But, when you’re talking about God, you have to begin somewhere. And “God is love” is a pretty good place to start.

God is love – self-giving, self-emptying, self-denying, self-sacrificing love. God’s concern is always for us and not for God’s self. God is always seeking the best for us, always reaching out to us, always longing to make us whole. God is always for the underdog, the oppressed, the victimized, the battered, and the broken. God is always for justice, for righteousness, and goodness in every shape and form.

Begin with this concrete truth: God is love.

But we can’t stop there. We must immediately go on and say with the First Letter of John:

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.

The argument is straightforward: if God is love – with all that means – then God’s people must love – with all that means.

God is love – self-giving, self-emptying, self-denying, self-sacrificing love and that means that we must love in that same way. God’s concern is always for us and not for God’s self and our concern must always be for the other and not for ourselves. God is always seeking the best for us, always reaching out to us, always longing to make us whole and that means we must always be seeking the best for the other, always reaching out to the other, and always working to bring wholeness to the other. God is always for the underdog, the oppressed, the victimized, the battered, and the broken and they must be our first concern as well. God is always for justice, for righteousness, and goodness in every shape and form and so must we.

If, at its simplest and most basic, Christian theology is about who God is and who we are called to be, then we have no better foundation than love. Everyone good with that?

Now, if all of that were not good news enough, there's more. There's a verse in our passage that cries out for a few words:

We love because God first loved us.

I remember a conversation I had with one of my daughters quite a few years ago. She asked me, "Did you start loving me when I was born?" That's a very good question. What surprised me even more was my answer. "I loved you before you were born."

"We love because God first loved us." God's love was there before we were. God's love will be there long after we are gone. God's love welcomed us into this world. God's love will lead us out of this world.

The fancy, Latin based word is "prevenient" - that which comes before. If you grew up as a Methodist, you probably heard of the teaching of Arminius on "prevenient grace." I don't want to go there. I simply want to point out that we don't earn God's love, we don't deserve God's love, we don't work for God's love, we cannot merit God's love, we cannot be worthy of God's love.

Insert Wendy's illustration of the Yankee who ordered breakfast at a southern diner. The breakfast is delivered and with it a bowl of gelatinous goo. "What's this?" the customer (obviously from the north) asked. "It's grits," the server replied. "I didn't order grits." "Oh, honey, grits just come."

That's how it is with God's love. God's love just comes. It reaches out, engages us, and changes us. God's love doesn't care who you are, what color your skin is, what country you were born in, who you love, what you call God, how much you have, how much you don't have, where you live, where you went to school, or any of the other issues that seem to be filters for some to keep from loving. God's love is extravagant and without measure. It is as close as our heartbeat and nearer than our next breath.

And because that love greets us as we enter this world, because that love is waiting for us before we even know anything at all, because that love surrounds us and carries us, because that love will never fail us or forget us - then, we can love in that same extravagant way. We can greet everyone we meet with love. We can seek the best for the neighbor and the stranger. We can offer compassion where compassion is required. We can incarnate love in simple acts of mercy and kindness. We can love and we can practice love - not just in word or speech, but in truth and action.

It's just this simple:

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

When the Apostle Paul wrote to the Church in Corinth, he wrote words that have been used throughout the church's life. Many people have the words read at their wedding, though the words are not speaking about the love between two people who are giving their lives to each other. The words are about how God's people are to live and the love they are to share. Those words are:

Love is patient; love is kind;
love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude.
Love does not insist on its own way;
it is not irritable or resentful;
Love does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth.
Love bears all things, believes all things,
hopes all things, endures all things.
Love never ends.

That's a love that is not easy. Our world is too impatient and too cruel. Envy, immodesty, egotism, and loutishness are on full display. As one translation puts it:

Love doesn't strut,
Doesn't have a swelled head,
Doesn't force itself on others,
Isn't always "me first,"
Doesn't fly off the handle,
Doesn't keep score of the sins of others,
Doesn't revel when others grovel...

That's the way God loves. And that's the way you and I are called to love too.

"The Theology of Love." A very good place to start. And a very good place to finish.

For now and evermore. Amen.



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