

The Theology of Love

Psalm 22:25-31; I John 4:7-21

May 10, 2009

By Dr. David B. Freeman, Pastor
Weatherly Heights Baptist Church

I began working with the text for today's sermon thinking that this would be a simple, light sermon. God is love. Who would disagree with that, right? Surely everyone but the most ardent atheist would agree with that simple statement. God is love, and therefore we should love others. How much simpler could it be?

When I finished the research on the text, I had six pages of handwritten notes. Six pages and I hadn't even started writing the sermon. My thinking about the text changed. The title of the sermon changed. What I thought would be a "simple" text turned out to be complex, challenging, and quite revealing.

To begin I need to say something about the author. He reminds me of some of you. We think it was John, the apostle of Jesus, the brother of James the son of Zebedee, and the author of the Gospel of John, 2 and 3 John, and the book of Revelation. Agreement on this is far from universal. Nowhere in the text does it claim to be written by John. His name is attached to the title, and the theology is a lot like the Gospel of John. So if it was John, he was an older man by the time he wrote I John. It does not appear to be a letter like the letters of the apostle Paul. It is more of a theological treatise, maybe a sermon like I Peter. 2 and 3 John refer to him as the Elder. Paul refers to him in Galatians as a "pillar" of the church. The man who wrote I John appears to have been a respected elder statesman, someone held in high esteem in the early churches. We may assume that through his many years life surely had dug its claws deeply into his heart and soul. Surely he had been through the fires. But he didn't quit. He practiced what one philosopher called "a long obedience in the same direction" (Nietzsche). As a result, he became wise and respected. In our text for today, which originally may have been a sermon, he shared that wisdom.

He does remind me of some of you. You are older now. Along the way, life dug its claws deeply into your heart and soul too. You may have been tempted to quit, to opt out of church and life too if you could. But you

didn't. You too have practiced a long obedience in the same direction. And in my opinion you became wise. You are able to talk honestly about your experiences and how God mattered or didn't matter. I resonate with that level of honesty. I think most do. That's why we enjoy hearing religious autobiographies. And by the way, we've just heard four excellent religious autobiographies.

John, the respected elder statesman, raises the issue of love in this text and plumbs the theological depths of it. Let me share with you some of what I found in this text.

First, it is **complex**. Here's why. The text says simply "God is love," but John and his audience would have understood the word "love" differently than we do. For us, love is mostly an emotion and is often associated with romance. We *feel* love toward a spouse or a girlfriend/boyfriend. Or we *feel* love toward our children or a friend. I grew up in the 70s with what is now called "classic" Rock and Roll. We listened to the band Boston and their classic song, "More Than a Feeling." It was a great song. And Joe Cocker, "You Are So Beautiful." Some of you grew up with Elvis listening to "I Can't Help Falling in Love with You" and "Love Me Tender." Maybe I should have asked the choir to sing "Love Me Tender." Do you think they would have revolted? Maybe mutiny is the better word! Those love songs we grew up on are about emotions, feelings.

We also tend to use the word "love" simply to make a statement stronger, even if it is in reference to something superficial or silly. "I love your new car!" we may say. Or, "I just love your new haircut." That's the way we use the word "love."

All of this would have been foreign to John and his audience. They had multiple words for love. If they wanted to express romantic love, they used the word *eros*. If they were talking about the love of family or friends, they used *philos*. I say this text is complex because John uses yet another word, the word *agape*. That word would never have been used to describe a car or a haircut. It is the word used to describe God's love for the world in John 3:16. It is not defined by romance or feelings. They would not have said, "God loves the world," and then drawn a heart beside that statement. *Agape* is not primarily emotion. It is primarily volition, action, willing something. John the elder statesman said, "God's love was revealed among us in this way: God *sent* his only Son...." It wasn't something God felt about

humanity. It was something God willed, did, for humanity. God sent his son. *Agape* wills the good of another apart from feelings.

Do you remember what Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount? It is one of his hardest teachings. “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies....” What he really said was, “*Agape* your enemies....” This was not a command to have warm feelings toward someone who had done you great wrong. Jesus was not telling us to stuff our feelings inside and not feel what we really feel. He was telling us to be so formed by our faith that we can will good rather than evil toward an enemy—apart from our feelings. Is that hard? You better bet it is! It may be the hardest thing you’ve ever done in your life. But that is how we end the cycles of violence that exist. We *agape* our enemies.

This text is complex, but that’s not all. As you can see, it is also **challenging**. Remember, this was no Pollyanna writer. John and his brother James were once called the “sons of thunder.” James was martyred. John matured to become one of the pillars of the early church. He was shaped by the teachings of Jesus, his Lord. He saw the miracle that was the life and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth. Now as a respected elder statesman he was telling his beloved friends that their God was *agape*. That is the essential character of God. They could know that because God *sent* Jesus. Then he said this, “Beloved, since God loved us so much, we ought to love one another.... If we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.”

This is challenging. Let’s say you’re divorced. You may have endured years of trauma. Emotional abuse. Possibly physical abuse. He had all the power, and you had none. You finally found the strength to divorce. For months your life unraveled. You had no money. You depended upon family and friends. But with the help of a good counselor, loving friends and family, and supportive church, you began to rebuild your life and be healthy again. Then you show up at church one day and the pastor says, “You’ve got to love him.”

You say, “No, sir! I don’t intend to. I would rather hate him for what he did to my life. That is what he deserves.”

I think John would understand that. Probably all of us in this room have sympathy for that too. It is a natural human response. But who does it hurt? Your hatred does not hurt him. It hurts you only. It eats you alive. When John says that we “ought to love one another,” he is not talking about having warm fuzzies and getting remarried. This is not encouragement to put yourself back into a situation where you will be hurt again. It is encouragement to release the hatred and be free from that crippling millstone. *Agape* does not will evil; it wills good—apart from feelings.

It is complex. It is challenging. And hardest of all it is **revealing**. I’ll warn you. John does not mince words here. I don’t think he meant this in a hateful way. As an elder statesman, he said it as he experienced it: “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.” I wonder if there was a gasp in the congregation after he said that? He ends with this, which sounds like it comes directly from the Gospel of John: “The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.”

Agape: it is revealing. According to John, failure to practice *agape* towards others invalidates any claim we may make to love God. It is quite revealing.

Some of you may know the name Bernard of Clairvaux. He lived in France during the 12th century. He is regarded by some as one of the holiest men who ever lived. In a great writing, he describes the “four degrees of love,” four stages love goes through as it matures. The first degree of love is when we *love our self for our self’s sake*. This, he says, is an immature and selfish form of love where we love our self only and only for our sake.

The second degree of love is to *love God for self’s sake*. Here we love God for what God can do for us. God is our provider, protector, and ultimately the one who saves us. We love God for our sake.

The third degree of love is to *love God for God’s sake*. In the first degree of love, we love our self for our own sake. In the second degree of love, we love God for our sake, for what God can do for us. If we continue in growth and movement toward God, though, we enter the third degree where we love God for God’s sake alone. We taste the sweetness of God, he says, and it draws us into the pure love of God.

And the fourth degree of love is to *love self for God's sake*. It is, he says, a most blessed state, rarely experienced and usually only for a moment or two. Once we have tasted the beauty, the wonder, of that love, it will forever call to us—the love of self for God's sake.

Agape. Love of God. Love of others. And love of self. In this simple text, John gives us a theology of love. At the end of the week, I concluded that we don't interpret this text from I John at all. It interprets us. It is complex. It is challenging. It is revealing. And deep in my heart I know that it is truth, truth given to us by a respected elder statesman. John, we thank you.

Closing Prayer

God who is love, we have but scratched the surface, and we know it. Help us to practice a long obedience in the same direction that we too may be wise. Amen.