

Fifth Sunday of Easter
Grace Church of West Feliciana Parish
St. Francisville, LA
29 April 2018

1 John 4:7-21

There are many labels or attributes by which God is known. Almighty, filled with all might; Omniscient, one who knows everything; Omnipotent, one with immeasurable power and creative ability; Omnipresent, one who can be in all places at once; Infinite or eternal, one who has always lived and will for ever live; All Gracious, one with unlimited grace and benevolence; All Holy, one who is in himself holiness; and there are others like immanence, immutability, impassibility, impeccability, etc. These are all words that attempt to capture one small glimpse of God. None of these words fully contain God, but all of them together give us an idea of God's immenseness. We have a God who is much greater than the ever expanding universe, because he made that universe and by his will it came to be. This grandeur is almost incomprehensible. We can spent centuries studying each of these attributes of God and only be able to scratch a very tiny surface of who God truly is in himself.

Holy Scripture has also grappled with the reality of God from the very first page. We call God Creator, Liberator, Judge, Redeemer, Sanctifier, Infinite, Provider, Transcendent, King, etc. When it comes to understanding the reality of God, our human language is insufficient to understand the fulness of who God is. God is a complete mystery and yet, he delights in revealing himself to humanity, by showing us some of his characteristics. To Moses he says, "I am who I am", to the prophets he says, "I am the God of your Ancestors", to Jesus he says, "I am your Father, and you are my Son, the beloved." And to us he tells us today through the author of 1 John 4:8, "I am love." Of all the attributes of God, this one is the most compelling for me. This attribute explains fully the plans of salvation God has unfolded since the beginning of creation. A plan that came to its ultimate fulfillment in the coming, ministry, passion, and resurrection of his Son, Jesus of Nazareth. Let us see in more detail what John says about God.

He starts with a command, "Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God". This a beautiful start to this passage, All love proceeds from God. Those who love one another, love God and are obedient to his will for humanity. John continues, "Everyone who loves is born of God and knows God." Not only is love a mandate from God, it is our very identity as human beings. Those who love are born from God. We share God's very DNA. Not just created by God, but born from God as children are born from mothers and fathers. To love is to claim that we are sons and daughters of God. It is to say, love runs through my veins. Love is at the very heart of my DNA. When we become aware of this vocation, the fact that we were created to love, we automatically know something important about God. Those who love know God and are known by God.

John tells us why, “Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love.” This is the key. Among all other attributes, God has an attribute that is central and most important than any other attribute. God is love. When we love, we acknowledge that we know God because God himself is love. To love another is to love God. And how do we know that God is love? John says, “God’s love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him.” This is how we know. God sent his Son into the world out of love. He was willing to give up his Son’s life for humanity past, present, and future. Only one who loves the world this much would be willing to endure such pain and such sorrow. To see his only son dying on a cross. To endure the insults and the pain to save rebellious people, this is infinite and complete love. John says, “In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins.” This is the key of the passage. We are invited to love others because God loved us first. Before we were able to do anything for God, God did something incredible for us, dying on a cross for us. This is the ultimate proof of his love. There is no greater love than to give up your life for your enemies, for wayward children who had turned away from him, for prodigal sons and daughters who had squandered all that God had given us and found ourselves lost, isolated, and hungry for forgiveness.

John continues, “Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.” God abides in those who love others as much as they love themselves and as much as God has loved them. And John tells us that this type of love is possible because God has given us his Holy Spirit. We are not orphans, Jesus lives and walks among us through his Holy Spirit. It is now possible to love others because the Spirit gives us the ability to love, if we are able and if we open ourselves in body, mind, and soul to God’s Holy Spirit. So, our mission is very clear, we are “To testify that the Father has sent his Son as the Savior of the world. God abides in those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God, and they abide in God.” And we must love others without fear. “There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. We love because he first loved us.” These are the two components of our vocation. We are to believe that God sent his Son as the Savior of the World, and we are to love others not out of fear of condemnation, but in perfect freedom, knowing that God loved us first.

Many of us love out of fear of punishment. If we don’t love we will be condemned at the day of trial. So, we love with resentment and bitterness. We love under compulsion and out of guilt. We love because we have to love. It is when we realize that God loved us first just as we were, with scars and rough edges, with our propensity for self-directed behaviors, and our need for control, with our insecurities and our tendency toward perfectionism, with our apathy and our neglect. God loved us first, in perfect freedom he loved us first. Not because God had to, but because he wanted to. A love without regard for consequences. A love that reaches across the divide to breach the gulf of separation between us and God. It is when we

acknowledge this incredible love that we find the courage to love as God loves. It is then that we find the courage to love in freedom, out of gratitude, and out of devotion to God and the people he has given us.

John finishes his passage, “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. The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.” There we have it in a nutshell. We can not say we love God without saying we love others, our brothers and sisters, our neighbors, and our communities.

Now, let me explain the kind of love John is talking about. The word he uses is communal love or Agapao, from which we get agape meal. This type of love is not erotao or erotic love, as in the love you have for a spouse. This is not fileo, from which you get Philadelphia, as in the love you have for your mother or your sister. This is agapao, as in the love God has for all of us and the love communities have for their members, and members have for each other. This type of love is always a choice of the will and not an emotion. We can not say, “I just don’t feel like loving Mrs. Smith.” Rather we can say, “I have chosen not to love Mrs. Smith.” This is why God gives us his Holy Spirit. The Spirit gives the ability to love to all those who have made a choice to love. In the same way that God made the choice to send his Son into the world to love us to the point of death, we must choose to love other in absolute joy and in complete freedom.

Now, I am not going to pretend that this type of love is easy or free. This type of love is so costly that it cause God’s son his very life. But, one thing I know, with God’s Holy Spirit on our side, this type of love is possible. Start today by withholding judgement and accepting others for who they are. Start today by trying to walk a mile in somebody else’s shoes. Start today by forgiving those who have offended your pride or your ego. Start today by choosing to visit an isolated neighbor or relative, even if they are not the nicest or kindest people you know. Start today with a small gesture and let the Holy Spirit do the rest. I promise that choosing to love others this way with transform your life and the lives of those around you. May God continue to bless you. Amen!