

“The Pearls of Life: Love”
1 John 4:7-12

Two weeks ago, when we showed the movie “The Miracle Season” at our church with Ernie Found presenting about the story behind it, I was struck by something that he said in his description of his wife. He told us some very powerful stories about his wife and his daughter who died tragically and how he allowed Hollywood to produce a movie about his daughter’s influence on the volleyball team of her high school. But the thing that really struck me was how he described his wife Ellyn. He said, “she was a person who knew how to love well.” Then he proceeded to give us several examples about the way she loved. What a powerful statement about someone’s life, “knowing how to love well.” I wondered when I heard these words about our lives as followers of Jesus and if others would say that about us. In light of our scripture for today, that is a tough calling. In 1 John 4, we hear the following words about love in such an emphatic way that it is hard to miss the point. Love is the central theme of the Christian life and yet love is one of the most difficult things to practice in daily life, especially when people are being unlovable or when our egos, insecurities, and fears are involved. We don’t have to look very hard to see Christians being unloving. It seems that almost every week we hear about Roman Catholic priests abusing their power and position to molest children. Or think of the hate that some Christians spew out against those they consider to be “unrepentant sinners.” A few years ago, I heard a statement by Marcus Borg that bothered me to no end. He said, “the only public place where hate speech is allowed in this country is the church.” He was referring to how many Christian churches have taught or continue to teach that only heterosexual love is acceptable to God. Even on smaller scales, we struggle to be accepting of all people and to show love unconditionally as God has loved us, from the times we get stuck in our relationships to the times we leave our church communities in order to avoid the pain of dealing with each other when we disagree or hurt each other.

The good news is that I believe on this side of eternity, we will never really get it right 100% of the time. But that does not mean that we should give up on the whole thing. What it means is that we need help learning how to love and we need a lot of practice.

This is what I believe the author of 1 John 4 was trying to instill in the followers of Jesus as they seemed to have forgotten that love was the main focus of the Christian life. The time of the writing of the letter is around or after the year 100 CE. The Christian movement was entering its second century and already had had a major division. It was first started as a branch of Judaism but now was kicked out of the synagogue and the separation was complete. In addition, there were different teachings about Jesus and what it meant to follow him. There were different philosophies competing to define the main ways to understand the faith. But the author of our text for today was proposing something completely different from all of the theological and philosophical debates and divisions of his time. This letter, which is written more like a sermon for a general audience, was calling the followers of Christ to focus on the centrality of love for the Christian faith. Love was the answer which the author of First John was proposing for the early Christians. This was not some lame easy answer that he was proposing. It is

not a call to just get along with others. He was challenging them to get off their high moral and theological horses to truly follow Jesus with sacrificial acts of love.

The wisdom he was offering was tough because it is much easier to talk about the faith than to practice it. It is much easier to “defend” the boundaries of the “true” faith than to live out the high calling of Christ on our lives. It is also tempting to stay on the surface of the faith where we label people according to our likes and dislike. It is much harder for us to get to know the heart of those whom we label as our enemies or as heretics. We are often tempted to reduce God to our thoughts about God as if we can truly know and define the ineffable mystery of God and life. The true measure of our faith is not theological correctness but true love for Christ and for the world which Christ loved and redeemed. The three indicators which the author of this letter gives to us to measure our faith are: 1. Being awakened to God’s love in our lives. 2. Being committed to loving others, both believers and nonbelievers (meaning those we agree with and those we don’t agree with). 3. Sharing our wealth with the poor.

To the author of First John faith is not a matter of belief, it is rather a matter of love; being in right relationship with Christ, with others, and with ourselves. The Christian faith at the heart of it is a matter of the heart and of how we live every day. Actions speak louder than words! And this is the focus of the two love pearls in our Pearls of Life strand. According to the book *The Pearls of Life*, “Love is life’s greatest gift, a source of eternal joy.” Love is the essence of our lives.

This passage about love both gives us great hope and an incredible challenge. It frees us from the fear of heresy and the need to control everyone’s belief system. It releases us from the need to define and limit God through our intellectual concepts of God. One of the tests that I find to be always true is that if my faith leads me to resent anyone, something had gone wrong! This does not mean that I don’t disagree with some people or that I don’t work for justice for certain issues. It is the way I work on these issues and deal with my opponents that could allow God in or shut the Spirit of God out of my life. This passage also challenges us to greater faith and love. Our work of faith is to be always alert to God’s presence in the world and to join God’s mission of love by giving of ourselves for the service of that love. We can’t go claiming the name of Christ in church and elsewhere if we are not willing to risk our own comfort to go where God is calling us to go by expanding our love for others.

In his book *The Great Spiritual Migration*, Brian McLaren, develops this idea of love into a call for the church to become a school for love: “What I believe can and should happen is that tens of thousands of congregations will become what I call schools or studios of love. That’s the desired future to which I am passionately committed. I’m not concerned about a congregation’s denomination, musical style, or liturgical taste; I don’t care if they meet weekly in a cathedral, monthly in a bar, annually at a retreat center, or daily online. I don’t care whether they are big or small, formal or casual, hip or unhip, or whether their style of worship is traditional or contemporary or whatever. What I care about is whether they are teaching people to live a life of love, from the heart, for God, for all people no exceptions, and for all creation. These churches would aim to take

people at every age and ability level and help them become the most loving version of themselves possible. They would help people face the challenges of life – challenges that could make them better, self-absorbed, callous, or hateful – with openness, courage, and generosity. They would help people recognize when they are straying from the way of love and help them get back on the path.”

Then McLaren goes on to develop an outline of what the curriculum of love might look like in the life of the church. Each of you has a copy of this outline (in the bulletin/and Arise announcements). I would like to invite you to turn to one or two other people next to you to discuss the one stage that appeals to you and how we might implement this kind of idea about the church being a community that is focused on the centrality of love in daily life and practice.

1. Infants and Toddlers: We would lay a foundation of helping children receive and experience love. We would create spaces where they experience kindness, delight, acceptance, and concern from adults beyond the circle of parents and close family members, so they experience love as a fact of life, not just a facet of family. We would help them associate the experience of love with the language of God.
2. Toddlers and Pre-school: We would help children learn practices and habits of love among family and friends: courtesy (please, thank you, excuse me), apology (I'm sorry. Will you forgive me?), self-reporting (I am angry. I am frustrated. I am excited.), request (Please help me. Please let me try it myself.), etc.
3. Primary School: As children are learning practical skills of math, grammar, etc., we would teach them practical skills of love, starting, perhaps, with the fourteen characteristics of love found in 1 Corinthians 13 (patient, kind, does not envy, does not boast, not proud, does not dishonor, not self-seeking, not easily angered, keeps no record of wrongs, rejoices in good but not evil, protects, trusts, hopes, perseveres). This teaching would require experiential learning techniques, such as role play, action/reflection, etc.
4. Secondary School: The previous learnings would be reinforced, and then applied to expanding dimensions of life: loving self, loving family, loving friends, loving strangers, loving social outsiders and outcasts, loving enemies, loving earth, loving God.
5. Rite of Passage 1/Puberty: Shortly before puberty, special training would be included, focusing on love in relation to three dimensions of adulthood: sex, power, and money. How does a young adult experience sex in the framework of love? How does a young adult use power in the framework of love? How does a young adult manage money in the framework of love?
6. Rite of Passage 2/Spirituality: In the middle of secondary school, special training would focus on spiritual practices, helping students discern the experience of

love for God in the context of other loves – for neighbor/stranger/other/enemy, self, and the earth.

7. Rite of Passage 3/Vocation: At the end of secondary school, special training would focus on the choice and practice of vocation as a facet of love.
8. Rite of Passage 4/Life Partnership: Special training would focus on the role of love in mate/life partner selection and marriage.
9. Rite of Passage 5/Parenthood: During the first pregnancy or adoption process, special training would focus on loving parenting.
10. Rite of Passage 6/Midlife Transition: Around the age of 40, a mid-life love assessment would focus on love as the work of mature adulthood and preparing for elder/sage/mentor status.
11. Rite of Passage 7/Senior Living/Retirement: Around the age of 65-70, a late-in life love training would focus on the work of being an elder.
12. Rite of Passage 8/Death Preparation: At an appropriate time, special training would be presented to help people pass from this life with love for neighbors, self, the earth, and God.

Let's share our insights. We will listen to the scripture again and pray that it may continue to be fulfilled in our midst.

Amen.