

God Sightings

1 John 4:7-12

May 6, 2018

Two weeks ago, we talked about loving one another by laying down our lives. The Apostle John writes about love a lot.¹ Back in 1 John 2:7, John told his readers that loving one another is an old command,² which seems to be a reference to something that Jesus' had said some 60 years earlier in Jn. 13:34, "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another."³ Loving one another is a distinctive, foundational, Christian trait! And even though we just talked about love 2 weeks ago, we need to talk about it again. But, it's the Apostle John's fault. HE KEEPS talking about love, which is pushing us to keep thinking about it.

Earlier this week, I found this wadded up sheet of paper out in the church's softball field. I'm not usually snoopy so I was about to throw it away, but my curiosity got the best of me. So, I read it. Want to know what it said? "My Beloved James, words cannot express the great sadness I've been feeling since I broke off our engagement a few months ago. Please, say you'll take me back again. No one could ever take your place in my heart, so please forgive me. I love you, I love you, I love you! Yours Forever, Marie... (Oh yeah, there was also a P.S. "By the way, congratulations on winning the state lottery.") Ok, I didn't really find this note in the softball field. And, I certainly wouldn't have gossiped about it in a sermon! But love can be fickle can't it? It's difficult to love someone else well. To love them deeply, consistently, and without false motives. When loving one another gets tough, what gives us the motivation to press on? Please open your Bible to 1 John 4.

1. Loving one another overflows from our relationship with God. 1 John 4:7-8 says, "Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love." Loving one another demonstrates that we've been born again and that we know God. Failure to demonstrate that love shows a disconnect from God. The best way for us to love one another better is not just to try harder. Rather, getting to know God better, will help us to love one another more. 1 John 4:7 begins, "Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God..." He is the source. God Himself is the One who provides the love that we need. God doesn't ask us to dig up enough love from within our own hearts. God lets us access His vast resources.

Back in the 90s my buddies and I use to hunt deer over in Cook, MN⁴. We hauled my little pop-up camper from the cities and set it up in the middle of the woods on some property of a friend of ours. We heated the camper with a small propane tank and had to bring in our own food and supplies. There was no water source out there. Now, I suppose we could have melted down some snow or collected the water each morning as it dripped off the corner of the rusty old camper roof. But, fortunately, we had another option. Some of the locals told us that we should take a bunch of empty jugs over to this little ditch behind the local bar. It may have been a grocery store too and I think there was also one broken down gas pump out front as well. Anyhow, back behind the bar, right down in the ditch, in the middle of some bushes, there was a freshwater spring. It was just a single pipe sticking right out of the ground, constantly pouring out water into the little creek. Surprisingly, it's some of the best tasting water I've ever had. There is no cost for this water and it's always running 24/7. So we would just pull up in our car, fill up our jugs, and be on our way with gallons and gallons of delicious, fresh, clean water. A resource that we lacked entirely at deer camp was in vast supply due to the simple and clear bounty of God's good creation. Like this water, God also provides His love. The source for loving one another comes from God. God provides us with the love we don't

¹ In fact, just in chapter 4, John uses some form of the word "love" 27 times, 13 of which are in our passage this morning.

² We looked at this back on 2/25/18. The sermon was titled, "Living Like Jesus."

³ Jesus repeats this command again in His famous Vine and the Branches teaching. John 15:12 says, "My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you."

⁴ Some of you may remember this illustration from a sermon I preached back on 7/1/01 titled, "To Know Me Is To Love Others." It was based on this same section of verses.

have on our own. So when it feels like we just can't love someone, we need to pray that God will help us. The key to loving one another well is not in just gritting our teeth and trying harder, it's in accessing the source of love: God Himself.⁵

1 John 4:8 ends with this little phrase,⁶ "God is love."⁷ Since God IS love, we should understand that love is not just one of God's many activities but rather that each and every one of God's activities is loving.⁸ Therefore, when God leads, He leads in love. When He makes rules, He makes them in love. When God disciplines, He disciplines in love.⁹ This is His very nature and everything that transpires from Him is done in love. All His interactions with us are in love. Likewise, all of our interactions with one another should be in love. We have been born of Him. We are in relationship with the One who is love. Therefore, we should demonstrate God's love in everything that we do. In our attitudes, actions, and words.

2. Loving one another is modeled after God sending His Son. This model is clearly laid out in 1 John 4:9-10, "This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins."

God's model is sacrificial. Let's not fail to highlight the real cost here. God sent His very precious "one and only Son." This gift was unique. When God sent Jesus, it was a costly decision. He didn't send Jesus out of a whole pile of kids He had to choose from. God only had one child, a son, but He sent Him anyway.¹⁰ As God calls us to love one another, He calls us to taste the sacrifice. God didn't just talk about His love for us, He demonstrated it. One of the most incredible verses in all of Scripture is Romans 5:8: "But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us."¹¹ You see, our tendency is to love the ones who are easiest to love. Those who are convenient to love. Where would we be if God had loved us in such a limited way? What if He waited for us to get our act together before He started loving us? We'd be toast right? Now, I'm not suggesting we need to sacrifice our children to show others how much we love them. But I am suggesting that God's standard is set pretty high; it's fairly radical. It costs us something to love one another well. Verses like Romans 12:10 shouldn't surprise us then, "Be devoted to one another in love. Honor one another above yourselves." The call here is to go much further than just "getting along." The call is to devote ourselves to loving one another sacrificially. What an incredibly cool thing to be part of!

God's model takes initiative. It doesn't wait for someone else to take the first step. 1 John 4:10 says, "This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins." God's love was not a response to our efforts nor did we need to earn it first. God's love is a gift of grace, totally unmerited. Likewise, loving one another involves taking the initiative. We need to set aside whatever is hindering us. It might be pride, laziness, fear, bitterness, or something else. Taking initiative means reaching out to those sitting around you. It means inviting someone to play softball, join your small group, or to go out for lunch or coffee. Our love for one another is modeled after a love that takes initiative.

⁵ Loving one another is not an inborn virtue or something that we can just learn on our own. (Glenn W. Barker, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Vol. 12, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 1981, p. 342.)

⁶ He repeats this later on in v. 16.

⁷ 1 John teaches us a lot about God's character. It teaches us that God is love (4:8, 4:16) but also that God is light (1:5), God is faithful and just (1:9), God is holy (2:20), God is righteous (2:29, 3:7), God is great (4:4), and God is true and eternal (5:20).

⁸ Glenn W. Barker, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Vol. 12, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 1981, p. 342.

⁹ Glenn W. Barker, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Vol. 12, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 1981, p. 342.

¹⁰ See a great discussion on "one and only" and the Greek word "Monogenēs" (μονογενής) in Kruse, C. G. (2000). *The letters of John* (pp. 158–159). Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans Pub.; Apollos.

¹¹ This echoes back to something we read in 1 John 3:18, "Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth."

3. Loving one another is motivated by 2 things. 1 John 4:11 says, “Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.” Our 1st motivation for loving one other is...

1) Since God so loved us. Have you ever heard the saying, “to know me is to love me?” Well, God’s love is different than our love. God says, “to know Me is to love...others.” Once again, John goes somewhere I didn’t expect him to go. When he begins the sentence, “since God so loved us,” I expected him to write “then we also ought to love God.” But, he doesn’t. He switches it up and takes a left turn when I expected a right. To know Me, is to love OTHERS. Our response to God’s love is not just to return that love but to carry it forward in our love for one another. We are to bear with one another. We are to lay down our lives for each other. And it’s hard. It’s hard to love this way because we are not God. Sure, it’s easy for God because God is love. But, I’m not love. None of the people in this room are love. Only God is love. But, this just confirms the point I made earlier. God doesn’t leave us to our own sources, our own abilities and efforts. God provides the way for us to love one another. Since He provides us with what we need to love one another, it is more than reasonable for Him to make it a statement of our Christian duty to one another:¹² SINCE God SO loved us, we also OUGHT to love one another. Our 2nd motivation for loving one other is...

2) To make God “visible.” 1 John 4:12 says, “No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.” According to 1 John 4:12, in some very real sense, God’s love is made complete, it reaches its “full expression...when we love fellow Christians. Thus, the God whom ‘no one has ever seen’ is seen in those who love, because God lives in them.”¹³ One Bible commentator puts it this way, “God’s love for us is perfected only when it is reproduced... ‘among us’ in the Christian fellowship.”¹⁴

In a scene from *The Brother’s Karamazov*, there is a quote that goes like this, “the more I love mankind in general, the less I love people in particular, that is, individually, as separate persons...I am incapable of living in the same room with anyone even for two days, this I know from experience... In 24 hours I can begin to hate even the best of men: one because he takes too long eating his dinner, another because he has a cold and keeps blowing his nose...active love is labor and perseverance.”¹⁵ This is a profound idea. It’s much easier to love people in general terms; to love the idea of everyone loving one another. But, when we get down into the nitty gritty, when we climb down into the trenches of loving actual individuals, that is when our true colors will show. We aren’t allowed to pick/choose which people in this church we will love and not love. You might be thinking, “but Pastor Jerry, you don’t know this person the way I do. If you knew what they were like, you’d understand why I can’t love them...After what they’ve done and said to me and my family, it just isn’t going to happen. I’ve tried, I just CAN’T do it!” One Bible commentator reminds us, “Jesus loved His disciples to the very end, even as they manifested hard hearts, slow minds, and weak characters.”¹⁶ “Love is made visible by carrying out the severe demands required by it.”¹⁷

One of the greatest ways that we witness to a lost and dying world is when our church truly loves. When we allow God’s love to be made complete among us. It’s worth noting that v. 12 uses the word “if” rather than “since.” “If we love one another,” only then is God’s love made complete. If we don’t love, it is not. That’s quite a concept to ponder. Loving one another well provides genuine evidence for the existence of God - the proof is in the pudding. When our reputation as Christ-followers precedes us and people say out loud: “they really know how to love one another at that church down on the corner of Carr Lake Road and Washington Av!” This makes God look good.

This doesn’t mean we never struggle to love one another. There will certainly be times when it’s really tough to love one another due to things like: our jealousy and pride, mistakes that we make,

¹² Akin, D. L. (2001). 1, 2, 3 John (Vol. 38, p. 177). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

¹³ *NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 2130.

¹⁴ Glenn W. Barker, *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary, Vol. 12*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 1981, p. 344.

¹⁵ As quoted in the March 2018 issue of *Tabletalk*, “Loving Our Neighbors,” Ligonier Ministries, Inc., Sanford, FL, p. 29.

¹⁶ JR Vassar in the March 2018 issue of *Tabletalk*, “Loving Our Neighbors,” Ligonier Ministries, Inc., Sanford, FL, p. 30.

¹⁷ JR Vassar in the March 2018 issue of *Tabletalk*, “Loving Our Neighbors,” Ligonier Ministries, Inc., Sanford, FL, p. 29.

misunderstandings with one another, personalities that just don't click, different priorities for our hopes/dreams. Loving one another doesn't mean we never struggle, it means we never quit. We keep struggling, even when it gets tough.¹⁸ Loving one another is a key part of our witness to the watching world.¹⁹ It makes the unseen God visible.²⁰

*This sermon was preached at the Evangelical Free Church of Bemidji
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¹⁸ "if a believer cannot love his brother, it is doubtful whether he can love his neighbor." (See Glenn Barker, Expositors Bible Commentary, Vol. 12, p. 317.)

¹⁹ John 1:18 says, "No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known." From a verse like this, we might conclude that it is entirely up to Jesus to make God "visible." This is why Jesus came to earth in the flesh, so that He could make God known to us. However, one of the key reasons why "loving one another" is so important is mentioned by Jesus in John 13:35, "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another." Much like Jesus came to make God known, so also we make Him known by our love for one another.

²⁰ One way that our church demonstrates "loving one another" is through welcoming new members. And we do that occasionally on a Sunday morning. We are so blessed to have our very own "Membership Song." It was written by one of our members, Laura Engelstad. Some of the words come right out of our Purpose Statement. The song begins by talking about becoming one in Christ by celebrating His love, obeying His truth, and enlarging His kingdom. It ends with a call for us to join together in learning how to serve each other and help each other grow. It's a call for us to love one another well.