

“It’s All about Love”  
May 2, 2021  
Scripture: I John 4:7-21

The first time I saw it, I was confused and mildly amused. But the more I thought about it, I was offended. It was a car commercial for Subaru: “Love. It’s what makes a Subaru a Subaru.” A car. Now, I’ve never owned a Subaru, so maybe I’m just out of the loop, but if there’s a more effective way to cheapen a concept I really can’t think of it. We literally throw that word around with no intention of allowing it to shape us in any way. The writer of First John must be spinning in their grave.

For this writer there is nothing more central, more essential to experiencing God than love. Love is the heart and soul of the gospel, the very essence of God. If there’s one thing that is entirely consistent among the variety of writers in the New Testament, one way of looking at the world and understanding God’s motivation revealed through Christ it is the absolute centrality of love. Nothing is more important than love for these writers. That doesn’t mean faith isn’t important or good moral behavior or spiritual gifts, but as Paul says in another letter, without love all the rest are nothing. To take such an important insight and use it in the service of selling cars, to reduce it that way, is an abomination.

It might seem like I’m taking that silly commercial too seriously. But the more we debase that word the easier it becomes to discount it, to allow it to fall off the landscape of our awareness. We have to hold onto it! We have to insist it not be dragged through the mud so we can recognize it when it’s near. How else can we discern God?

We don’t know exactly what sort of conflict or controversy was brewing in the community around the writer of First John, but it’s led to some hateful rhetoric, we can guess. There seems to be a faction that believes the others aren’t measuring up to their standards. So, they may have separated themselves from the main group and the leadership. In response to that, as happens so often, the larger group may have labeled them as troublemakers and cut them off from participating fully. It’s a familiar pattern. It happens all the time in churches. In a broader way it can happen in whole societies. We’re living with some deep divisions in our country right now and there doesn’t seem to be an end to the accusations and suspicions.

The writer’s answer to this predicament is to call people to love: “Beloved, let us love one another.” It’s not a bromide of some kind, something you’d find embroidered on a pillow. This is a plea. If they want to survive as a community, they must love one another. And the danger is worse than just dissolving as a community: by refusing to love one another they are driving a wedge between themselves and God...because, the only way to know God is to love. “Whoever does not love, does not know God, for God is love.”

And there it is. God is love. If that’s true, then we must be talking about something very different than what makes a Subaru a Subaru.

Love is the motivating force that creates a union between us and God. When we love one another we open ourselves to the presence of God in each other and we share that presence through acts of compassion, generosity and justice. It's no longer possible for us to ignore or neglect a sister or brother in need. We live for each other, just as God lives for us through the resurrected Christ. In his book *Anam Cara: A Book of Celtic Wisdom*, Father John O'Donohue says it beautifully: "Love is absolutely vital for a human life. For love alone can awaken what is divine within you. In love, you grow and come home to your self. When you learn to love and let your self be loved, you come home to the hearth of your own spirit."

Love has been revealed in the world, says the writer of First John, through the person of Jesus who lived and died for our sake. Through Jesus we learn the importance of tangible expressions of love. It's not enough to offer those in need our thoughts and prayers. Love requires direct care, real engagement, a willingness to go beyond what's comfortable for us and put ourselves at risk.

Sometimes that risk is physical but more often it's emotional. Daring to acknowledge those people society rejects, simply to recognize their value, whether it's an undocumented immigrant or a transgender student or a homeless opioid addict, may not put you in any physical danger, but it could cause a rift between you and your family and friends. Love compels us to take that risk. When we commit ourselves to love, no matter what the cost, we can't help but embrace God's presence wherever we see it. And when we live in love, we see God everywhere.

I have a copy of the 1981 edition of a book titled *Strength to Love* by Martin Luther King, Jr., that was first published in 1963. I prefer the later copy, though, because it has a forward written by Coretta Scott King, Martin's widow. The book is a collection of a few of King's sermons along with a couple of essays. But what I really appreciate are Mrs. King's words, written more recently, in a time I can relate to. Reflecting on social realities in the '80's, realities that persist today, she writes, "The struggle to eliminate the world's evils—evils so flagrant and self-evident that they glare at us from every ghetto street and rural hovel—can only occur through a profound internal struggle. By reaching into and beyond ourselves and tapping the transcendent moral ethic of love, we shall overcome these evils. Love, truth, and the courage to do what is right should be our own guideposts on this lifelong journey."

The imperative to love isn't about sentimentality or blissful ignorance. It's about struggling to reveal God in ways that empower and embolden, that bring hope and encouragement to a world longing for God's embrace. We can bring God's presence to the world by living in love, so God will live in us.

Amen