

Love is... from God (1 John 4:7-21)

If we belong to a church does it matter if we really believe in what God has done for us in Jesus? If we have a 'personal relationship with God' does it really matter if we go to church? Should we just carry on watching services in the comfort of our home once the restrictions are lifted on church services? All of these questions are answered by the simple statement: "God is love." Check out this talk to see why.

I want to know what love is...

Last week I posted a link to St. Luke's online service with the question, "What is love?" One person responded by quoting the lyrics from a well known song, "Baby, don't hurt me!"

The truth is when we start talking about love, most people start thinking of romantic love and what the lyrics of different songs tell us about love. One of the songs I remember from when I was a teenager was a rock ballad by Foreigner, where the chorus goes, "I want to know what love is, I want you to show me..." This follows a line that says, "To change this lonely life."

For many people romantic love is the solution to loneliness. It is connecting with one other person in a special way, so that your desire is to be with them and their desire is to be with you. That is the essence of romantic love. But romantic love is exclusive, when another person becomes involved it is what we call a love triangle and things can become very messy!

Yet, when romantic love leads to the birth of a child, then another person comes into the relationship in a natural way. They are loved by their parents and their parents love them in return. Then, if a second child comes along, both children love their parents and they also have a natural 'brotherly love' for one another.

This is not a love triangle, but a triangle of love. This is not romantic love, but family love.

It is this triangle of love, that is much closer to the kind of love that John is talking about in his letter. As Christians we are born again into a spiritual family, where God, as Father is our parent and our fellow Christians are our brothers and sisters.

And this is what can change this lonely life as we enter into a relationship of truly deep love with God and the community of love in the church.

But this of course relies on the church truly grasping its calling and that is what John wants us to do.

As John says in verse 7:

"Let us love one another, for love comes from God."

Breaking the triangle

But, there are always dangers that this triangle can be broken.

It is not quite clear what the circumstances were behind John's letter to this particular church, but there are hints earlier in the letter. John talks of some people as 'antichrists' in chapter 2. The antichrists he says are those who used to belong to the church, but have now gone out from the church. It also seems that they are denying that Jesus was the Christ and probably some other fundamental truths of the Christian faith. John writes the letter so the church is not discouraged or led astray by these antichrists.

And perhaps we can see that he does not want their attitude to undermine the triangle of love that we are called to as Christians. In denying truths about Jesus, they undermine our understanding of God's love for us and in leaving the church they undermine the idea of loving one another.

To counteract this John seeks to strengthen the triangle of love, by helping us to see that love is fundamental to who we are as Christians, because as he says, 'God is love.'

I want to point out two things that we need to be clear on if this triangle of love is to be strengthened and we are to be the kind of Christian family God wants us to be: 1. True love is from God and 2. Reasons to love others.

1. True Love is from God

So, firstly, true love is from God. If we want to know what love is, then we need to look at the ultimate source of love, God himself.

God is love - 4:8,16

Twice in these verses is that remarkable statement, "God is love." But what does this mean?

Well let's think of similar statements.

If you say I want to know what 'yellow is.'

You might respond, "A banana is yellow."

If you say I want to know what 'cold is.'

You might respond, "Ice is cold."

If you say I want to know what 'fast is'

You might respond, "A train is fast."

What is being said is that each of these items demonstrate in a really clear way what these qualities are. When we look at a banana we can see what yellow is. When we touch ice, we can feel what cold is. When we travel in a train we experience what it is to go fast.

These are fundamental qualities of these items, but they do not completely define them - a banana is also bendy, ice is also slippery and a train is also long.

In the same way, God is not just love, there is more to God than that he loves, but if we want to know what love is, then God is the fundamental answer.

The cross shows us love

So where do we go to see, feel and experience this love of God. The answer is the cross.

That is why taking communion is so important for us as Christians, it brings us back to the cross, through what we see touch and experience. It takes us to the central expression of God's love.

So, if we want to know what love is, then we need to focus and reflect on the cross of Christ. Let me briefly suggest three things that the cross shows us about God's love.

Love is Self-Giving - 4:9-10

Firstly, love is self-giving. It is sacrificial. It says in verse 9 and 10 that God sent his son into the world. He sent him to ultimately die on the cross for us.

He did not just send a gift, a card, or a message. He actually came to us in the flesh as Jesus Christ and chose to lay down his life for us.

As it says in John 15:

"Greater love has no-one than this, than that he lay down his life for his friends." (John 15:13).

True love does not hold anything back, but it offers all that we are and all that we have. This is the love of God, this is the kind of love we are called to.

Love is Life-Giving

Secondly, love is life-giving. The cross was not just a demonstration of love, it actually did something. It met our greatest need. It brought us life, by reconnecting us with God and making possible the resurrection where death is defeated.

As Christians we are not called to sacrifice for the whims or desires of others. But we are called to sacrifice for the life of others, to help them have life to the full, because that is what the love of God does.

This life-giving love can express itself in many ways. It can mean sharing food with those who are hungry, providing shelter for those who are homeless, offering friendship for those who are lonely, comfort for those who are grieving and friendship to those who are lonely.

It can also include sharing the good news about Jesus, because that will bring them the ultimate gift of eternal life.

God's love is life-giving. As we seek to love others we need to ask ourselves are we bringing them life?

Love is Forgiving

Thirdly, love is forgiving. God sent Jesus to die on the cross as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.

For some people forgiveness is perhaps the hardest thing. It may be that people have treated you very badly and it is not easy to let go of the feeling that in some way they should pay for the harm they have done. It can feel like if we do that we are saying that the harm they have done does not matter.

But God does not say sin does not matter. If that was the case Jesus would not need to die for our sins. In dying for our sins, he says sin does matter. Sin does need to be paid for, it does need to be condemned. But on the cross, God pays the cost. Sin is not condoned, but it is condemned and so it is forgiven.

Forgiving others is not saying that what they have done does not matter, but it is saying that you are no longer going to make them pay for it. That is hard and

costly, but as Christians we can forgive others, because God has paid the even greater cost to forgive us.

What we believe matters - 4:14-15, 20

So, God is love and the cross of Christ shows us love. That is why what we believe about God and especially about Jesus is crucial if we are truly to be a people of love.

That is why in verses 14-15, John is clear that it is those who acknowledge and trust in these great truths about Jesus that are truly part of the family of God.

It is not some vague idea of love that shows we are God's children, but a love rooted in the faith that God first loved us.

- **Being a Christian is more than joining a church**

All of this shows us that being a Christian is more than joining a church. You can come to church, because you enjoy belonging to a community and being a part of something.

But if that is all you think is worthwhile in church, then you are not part of the triangle of love. True community and love must be rooted in the love of God and in a trust of what God has done for us. When we forget about God or distort the faith, then we damage the triangle and we lose out as a result.

As Jesus says, to truly bear fruit you must remain in me.

2. Why love others?

But the reverse is also true. We cannot claim to have a personal faith and relationship with God and not be actively engaged with fellow Christians. This passage also makes clear that to be a Christian involves loving other Christians. Indeed, that is the call at the start: "Let us love one another" (1 John 4:7). So, why should we love others?

Children of God - 4:7-8

Firstly, because we are children of God. Just as children are often like their parents in some way, so if to be a Christian is to be born of God, then we will naturally be like God.

And if God is love, then our key characteristic will be to love one another as well.

Cross of Christ - 4:11

Secondly, because of the cross of Christ. If we believe that we have life and forgiveness of our sins, because God loved us in sending his Son to die for us, then how can we not love in the same way.

In fact to fail to love as Jesus loved us is to deny the truth of the cross in our lifestyle in a way that is worse than doing so by what we say.

Completion of our Call - 4:12

But thirdly, we are also called to love one another, because such love completes God's love. God loves us, not just so we can love him, but in order to create a Christian family of love. That can only happen when we love our fellow Christian brothers and sisters.

When we do love one another in that way, we complete the triangle of love and so make God's love visible to the world. Verse 12 expresses this idea most clearly:

"No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete (or perfected) in us." (1 John 4:12)

The good news of God's love is made concrete when it is demonstrated and lived out in a community of faith. Let's pray that our church communities can increasingly display this love.

- **Being a Christian is more than 'a personal relationship with God'**

Some people say, that they can be a Christian without being a part of a church. That they like to just commune with God in the garden or in the countryside.

There will also be a temptation for some who have become used to doing church online during lockdown that when the restrictions are lifted they will just continue doing church online, rather than seeking to meet with and support other Christians.

But, this is not just possible, if you are truly a Christian, because it means you will not be part of a Christian community of love, you are reducing the triangle of love to just a line, you are failing to imitate God as a child of God, denying the work of the cross and not completing God's vision of love.

It shows you have not really understood God's love as being self-giving, life-giving and forgiving to others.

In fact it is to go the route of loneliness and to fail to help others out of their loneliness.

Let us where and when we can seek to make meeting with other Christians a real priority that we can truly live out our call to love one another.