

St. Paul's, Concord
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1 John 4:7-21
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There's a rather embarrassing story about when I was 7 years old and had a crush on a boy called Carl. Carl didn't have the slightest interest in me, but he *was* quite keen on some badges I wore to school one day. And that gave me a great idea. I said to Carl, "I'll give you these badges if you'll be my boyfriend." And Carl said, "It's a deal." So, for two days, Carl pushed me on the swing and caught me when I slid down the big slide and came over after school to watch television. It was great! But, by the third day, he'd lost interest and he went back to running around with the other boys at recess. And he kept the badges too.

So I learned early in life that, generally speaking, people don't love on demand. Even if there *are* some nice badges – or other incentives – on offer; love can't be ordered, purchased, negotiated or coerced. And, if we're honest, would it even be worth having if it could be?

Our entire excerpt from the first letter of John is an exhortation for us to love one another. If we claim to love God, John writes, we are *required* to love our brothers and sisters. In an earlier passage from this letter, that we read last week, John is even more emphatic: "...this is (God's) commandment," he writes, "that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us." (1 John 3:23) There's no escaping it.

And yet, as I learned in second grade, if someone tries to force us to love them, our natural instinct is to back off. We don't like to be told what to do; and we certainly don't like to be told how to feel. So how is it possible for us to obey the command to love one another? And how do we obey it *wholeheartedly*?

The answer can be found in the very first word of the text from John's letter. (1 John 4:7a) Many versions of the Bible have translated that greeting as "Dear friends" but the actual Greek word is ἀγαπητός and, as our text shows, it means "beloved." That word is significant, coming at the start of a section which is all about the expression of love. It's significant because it isn't simply John's *greeting* to his fellow Christians; it's his *description* of them. If I call you "dear friends," hopefully that assures you that I care for you. But if I call you "*beloved*," that doesn't only mean that *I* care for you; it means you're in a *state* of being loved. It means you're *defined* by that love.

When Jesus came up from his baptism in the River Jordan, God spoke from heaven, claiming him as his Son and calling him ἀγαπητός – *Beloved*. And the love that makes *us* beloved comes from the same source as the love that makes *Jesus* beloved. We're *God's* beloved sons and daughters, and that makes all the difference.

Matthew (22:37-39), Mark, (12:29-31) and Luke (10:27-28) all record Jesus giving the Great Commandment: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself." It's our *response* that God's after. Loving God and loving others is how we respond to the God who "first loved us." (1 John 4:19)

There is of course a fundamental difference between loving God and loving other people. So many people who clearly need love make the process of loving them an ordeal. Think of a father who adores his children but regularly loses his temper with them. Or a mother, whose love for her grown children is so suffocating that they can't begin to make a life for themselves. Think of a husband or wife who is devoted to their spouse but intent on changing them. Think of a child who forces their best friend to do something harmful or illegal. And these are just examples of people we're close to.

God's love isn't like *any* human relationship in our experience. God doesn't have an unreasonable or unpredictable temper; God doesn't imprison us with emotional blackmail; God doesn't try to make us into someone we can't be; and God never encourages us to do wrong.

But God's love doesn't only *exclude* negative events; it *includes* the most positive event in the history of the human race. John wrote this: "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. (1 John 4:9)

God's love for us isn't abusive, intimidating, oppressive, demanding or manipulative. Quite the opposite in fact: God's love is *liberating*.

So when we're commanded to love God and to love our neighbor, we're *not* being forced into an unnatural response; we're being given the freedom to respond in the most *natural* way there is. Yes, it's an opportunity to give our love to the one who gave us life, but even more than that, it's the opportunity to *live out* the love that God makes perfect in us. From the start, God intended us to be loving creatures. It's part of our make-up. In fact, it's the most important part because it's the part that unites us with our Creator.

So, even when we encounter a stranger who's difficult to love – or a neighbour, or a family member for that matter – when we find ourselves struggling to rustle up some genuine affection, it helps to remember that there is no coercion at play. There isn't even any bribery involved. Yes, there is a reward that comes from sharing our God-given love with another person – but it's the reward of seeing *them* transformed. There is nothing more fulfilling than witnessing someone's recognition of their belovedness! In fact, it's one of the greatest motivating factors for ministry. I would even go so far as to say that it's the primary purpose of the Christian Church.

Here at St. Paul's, we're putting a lot of thought and energy into our ministry of hospitality. You'll hear terms like "Radical Welcome," "Beloved Community," and "Invite, Welcome, Connect," – and I hope you'll become involved in our initiatives for welcoming new people into this community of faith. Whether or not you're comfortable with the word, what we're engaging in is evangelism. And, as our Presiding Bishop, Michael Curry says, "Evangelism isn't about increasing church attendance, it's about making the world a better place." The meaning of the word evangelism is simply spreading the good news. And the good news we have to share is that our church is a beloved community.

When John wrote this letter to the early church, when he called its readers "beloved," he knew exactly what he was talking about. Because he himself was beloved. For John, being a follower of Christ was clear and simple: "... since God loves us so much, we also ought to love one another." (1 John 4:11)

John knew that it's not possible to love God *without* loving one another. That's partly because our perception is limited. I doubt any of us has seen God in the flesh, and so we *need* a focus for the loving response God generates in us. But that's only part of it.

The main reason why our love for God *has* to be expressed through our love for one another, is that it can't survive any other way. God's love is designed to be poured out, and to *increase*, not *decrease*, the further it spreads.

Think of a pyramid of glasses with champagne being poured into the one at the top. When that one overflows, the *next* tier of glasses is filled. When *they* overflow, twice as many again are filled. It isn't possible for any one glass to either resist the champagne or to direct it back up again to the original glass. Each glass can only receive, be filled and overflow to fill other glasses.

I'm pretty sure John didn't have the image of champagne glasses in mind when he wrote his letter, but he understood the concept of being filled and overflowing. After all, that's what he was doing when he, God's beloved, addressed his letter to others beloved of God. And, especially, when he urged them to join him in loving one another.

When we, God's beloved, love others who are beloved by God, we're ensuring that God's love flows in the right direction. Our love flows back to God as well, of course, but it does so much more effectively when it's spreading out to others!

God loves us and commands us to give our love in return. And because that command is intended to guide us into the best possible life, we can obey it willingly and joyfully. A life devoted to loving others, is a life that's given as a love gift to God.

*God, our Creator,
we thank you that you have loved us from the very beginning.
Help us to respond to your love by loving one another.
Help us to see ourselves and each other through your eyes,
and to understand what it means to be beloved.
We love because you first loved us.
Amen.*