

March 5, 2017

Lesson 1: 1 John 4:17-19

The Source of All Love

Context:

The scripture reading for the next few weeks comes from the letters of First John, some of the shortest letters in the New Testament. According to scholars, the Johannine letters belong to the same circle of early Christianity that produced the Gospel of John.¹ The author of the letter appears to be addressed to certain Christians who may have divisions in the church. While we do not know the exact location, we can guess that the letters probably circulated in Asia Minor near the same places that the Gospel of John circulated.² As one reads through the letter, there is tangible tension within the Christian community. Apparently, there is a failure to show love and it is causing people to make groups and categorizing is taking place. To make the point, the author constantly refers to “we” and a focus on what Christians are called to do. Christianity is not just about belief, it is about practice and the early church is to remember that in how they conduct even the business matters of the church.

In this particular passage, we hear some very powerful declarations being made when it comes to who God is and how that plays out in the church. Simply put: God is love. Those who love remain in God and thus, God remains in them. As love is perfected in humanity, it comes to show in the ways that Christians live in the world. Love is what causes fear to go away and those who are afraid have not become perfected in love. Because God loves us, we are given the ability to love. The author goes on to name a behavior that is inconsistent with loving God: hating a brother a sister. These are powerful words to churches that might be allowing conflicting to override their witness and how they treat one another.

Application:

There are days I wish we could just let these words from 1 John be read at the opening of any church business meeting, any Sunday school class, and any time there was conflict. The message is so powerful that you if you realize the impact, you realize what the author is making a profound theological point. Because of God’s love for us, we are to love others without fear, suspicion, or judgment. And that knowledge of God’s love changes us and calls us to lead a new life. In this new life we begin to respond in love and not in hate, slander, or self-defense mechanisms. We are to constantly think about what it means to love our neighbors.

With the word love, things change. That means seeing even the person we disagree with most vehemently as a child of God and that we are called to love them, no matter how hard it may be. That also means seeing the person that we fear as someone to love as well.

¹ D. Moody Smith, *Interpretation: First, Second, and Third John*, (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1991), 8.

² *Ibid*, 21.

Just imagine what the world could become if we let love and concern for others drive how we interacted with others, especially those different from us. I will never forget a humbling experience I had when I was in college. Our chaplain invited me to participate in the Inter-Faith dialogue group during my freshman year. One of the things that we did was to visit places of different faiths to ask questions about what they believed and to see their places of worship. To be honest, I was excited about the ones that seem similar to my own background. The visit to the Greek Orthodox Church, the Roman Catholic church, and even the Jewish synagogue piqued my interests. Even the visit to the Hindu Temple seemed exotic and intriguing. But there was one that made me nervous was the visit to the Islamic Mosque. Growing up in south Alabama, my experience with those who were Muslims was few and far between. But I do remember that some people believed that Muslims were terrorists and that they were a religion of hate and not peace. For a long time, I was afraid to even study Islam, let alone get to know a Muslim.

When the time came though, I decided to go because I had questions. When we arrived at the Islamic Center in Birmingham, I was shocked. There were kids playing in some of the rooms, and food was being cooked. They were getting ready for services much like we did on summer night revivals in Hope Hull, Alabama. But there were noticeable differences. The men prayed separately from the women and of course I could not understand the prayers. As a man I was allowed to go into the men's sections and watched as they went through the prayers and the postures they took on their prayer rugs.

Afterwards, we met with a couple who were local medical workers at UAB and some of the leaders of the center. As we shook hands, the woman explained to me that she could not shake my hand because I was not her husband. It was quite different than the big hugs I received on Sunday mornings from Southern matriarchs. But she was kind and very sweet in her explanation. We were able to ask questions about the Islam faith and the differences between the branches. We even talked about the attacks on September 11. In many ways, the couple had similar views to every day Christians. They wanted their kids in good schools, to receive a good education, and to be involved in their communities and in their faith. They themselves went on vacations and wanted to travel to Mecca as a pilgrimage just as I want to go to the Holy Land to see where Jesus walked. We laughed as we talked about the meal we received and how it was as bountiful as a Sunday potluck, but with healthier ingredients. All in all, we learned that we had more in common than we thought. Or at least that was the way it was for me.

For both parties, it was extending hospitality to someone who was different than them. And it took love for other people to understand that being fearful or suspicious of one another does not lead to anywhere or anything good. So as you go about this week, think about someone or some group you may "fear." Do a little research or even to get to know someone. And trust that God is in the midst of that. Because God is love, and those who remain in love remain in God and God remains in them.