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1 John 4:7-21

THE POWER OF LOVE

As much as our society sentimentalizes the notion of love, any one of us who has ever been in any kind of real relationship knows first-hand the hard work that is needed to love. While those warm emotions we often equate with love are wonderful--those tender feelings toward our brand new baby, those fluttery feelings we have for a romantic interest, those profound sentiments we have toward a beloved friend, parent, or sibling--these warm emotions do not make up the totality of love. They are but a tiny fraction of what love involves. Usually, usually it takes great strength to love. People are flawed. And people are broken. And people are hard to love. Like the son of a friend I learned about this week who has dropped out of college, moved back home, won't get a job, stays shut in his room all day, and may be dealing drugs. And his mother is desperate to know how to love, how to help, how to save her child.

When confronted with such scenarios as this, and those difficult scenarios you have no doubt faced in your own relationships in life, when confronted with such scenarios, it becomes clear that love is much, much more than an emotion. It is not simply something we *feel* but it is something we do, something we act, something we live, something we embody.

This is the essence of what the writer of 1 John is trying to convey to us in his letter. In trying to teach us about love, the writer of 1 John begins at the beginning: with God. God is love, we are told. God is love. But the love that is discussed here by the writer of this letter is not a sentimental, warm, fuzzy kind of love--but rather a love that is rooted in strength and commitment. In Greek it is called *agape*. It is a fierce, strong, powerful kind of love that endures and sacrifices and remains steadfast. This is how we are loved by God. With this fierce,

powerful, steadfast kind of love. And because this kind of love is not based on an emotion--you know, emotions come and go--because it is not based on an emotion, it will endure no matter what. God's love endures no matter what we do. We don't even have to "clean up our act" in order to be loved by God. No matter how broken we are, no matter how shameful we may have behaved, nothing will keep God from loving us. God loves you. God loves you with a fierce, strong, powerful kind of love.

And here is the important part about God's love: God's love is never abstract. It is never about God sitting back, looking down on creation and saying, "I have such fond feelings for those people." Real love is never abstract. Real love is only meaningful when it takes a tangible form. Think about the way you have received real love from others--it's tangible. Real love is lived out, acted out, put into motion: Real love is known when you're up all night with a feverish child, feeding them ice chips. Real love is helping to bathe your ailing spouse or parent. Real love is chopping the vegetables to make soup for your next door neighbor who came home from the hospital. Real love is stocking a shelf at a food pantry so people in need will have food and writing letters to a member of Congress to address an injustice. Real love is never abstract.

And because God's love is the realest kind of love, God's love is never abstract but takes tangible form. The writer of our letter tells us 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." In love God came to live among us--a tangible sign of love. And this expression of God's love--this tangible expression we call Jesus--knew hunger, thirst, fatigue, disappointment, sorrow, pain, suffering, rejection, and death. In Jesus we see God's love made tangible and the strength and commitment and fierceness of God's love for us, even when we are undeserving.

And then our writer tells us that since God has loved us this way, we are to love one another with this same kind of steadfast, strong, fierce love. The writer adds that, "Those who say, 'I love God,' and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also." Of course, by "brothers and sisters" the writer did not mean merely our relatives but used these terms to mean everyone. Again, this is not a sentimental feeling kind of love but a love rooted in steadfastness, in commitment, a love that seeks the welfare of the other. We don't even have to like the other person or even know the other person to offer this kind of love.

Here's the thing about this kind of love. It is hard. Really hard. Most of the time we do not succeed at loving really well. In truth, we can't do it on our own. Instead, the writer of our letter tells us that it is only from this love of God within us that we are empowered to love this way. God is love, we are told, and God's love abides in us, and God's love is perfected in us when we live and act in the world as God has lived and acted in the world through Jesus. The power we need to love well comes from drawing upon that love of God that abides within us.

Thus, we learn that there is power in love. God's power. And we can tap into that power every single day of our lives. We often go about our lives thinking we don't have much power. There are forces in the world we can't control. There are governments doing things we can't control. The economy we can't control. Our family members we can't control. What kind of power do any of us ordinary people have? It can feel like we are powerless. Not so, our faith tells us. Not so. For you do indeed have power--great power. And I have power--great power. We have the power to love. And we find that power from the love God has first given us.

Years ago, the youth group I worked with in another church joined up with a couple other youth groups from other churches to go on a mission trip together. One of the students on the trip was a girl called Maureen. Adolescence had not been an easy time for Maureen. She was different in some significant ways that had made her an object of rejection, bullying, and unkindness at her school. But somehow, in this new setting among all these other youth who didn't know her history, Maureen became the most popular kid of the trip. She was funny and cool and everyone, both boys and girls, wanted to be in her orbit.

Also on this trip was another youth, a boy named Darren. Darren was immature for his age, kind of dweeby, and really annoying. He tried everyone's patience with his antics. The more he annoyed the other youth, the more they wanted nothing to do with him. It was also clear that Darren was especially infatuated with Maureen, causing him to ramp up his aggravating antics just to get her attention. After a few days, Maureen came to me to complain about this problem with Darren. I listened to her complaints and then I offered her something to think about. I told Maureen that she possessed some considerable power. It was the power to extend kindness or to withhold kindness. It was the power to include or to reject. It was the power to love. In her hands rested this power. And how she used it was up to her. And then I asked her to consider the implications of what using her power to include Darren might mean for him and for the others in the group who frankly took their cues from her. Maureen listened silently but said nothing. I wondered if this idea of possessing power might be a new concept for a girl who herself had frequently known rejection from her peers. But something must have sunk in because over the remainder of our trip, I saw a change. I watched as Maureen actively included Darren in the group's activities and goofing around. I watched her joke with him, and talk with

him, and engage him. I watched as the other youth followed her lead. And I watched as the smile on Darren's face kept growing.

We have power. It is the power to love. And it comes to us from God's love that already abides within us. It is an extraordinary power. God shares the power to love with us. It now becomes our privilege to love as God loves, to have a share of God's own awesome power. God uses this power to heal us and transform us. That's what God has done in Jesus--to come in a tangible form to show us what love really looks like and to use that love to heal us and transform us. And then God shares that power with us. It is a considerable power. It not only changes the lives of those who receive this love but it changes the lives of all of us who do the loving. We become changed people, people in whom God's love and presence are perfected. To love, therefore, to love others with this kind of love that takes commitment and strength, is to participate in a sacred activity--even if in the moment it doesn't feel terribly sacred or wonderful. We become united with God--God in us and we in God.

The power to do this kind of loving already exists within you--you don't have to look anywhere else to find the power or the ability or the knowledge. How will we use the power God has given us? What tangible form will your love take today and tomorrow, and beyond? This is our true calling in life--no matter our education, our income, our age, our physical abilities, or any other life condition: to love others as God loves us.