



## “In This Is Love...”

### 1 John 4:7-21

The Fifth Sunday of Easter

May 14, 2006

There is a rock and blues band called “Huey Lewis and the News,” that wrote a song called “The Power of Love.” Here’s what they sang about love:

The power of love is a curious thing  
Make a one man weep, make another man sing  
Change a hawk to a little white dove  
More than a feeling that’s the power of love ...  
Make a bad one good make a wrong one right  
Power of love that keeps you home at night

And then the chorus goes:

And it don’t take money, don’t take fame  
Don’t need no credit card to ride this train  
It’s strong and it’s sudden it can be cruel sometimes  
But it might just save your life....

And with a little help from above  
You feel the power of love

You may never have heard of Huey Lewis and the News, but have you heard of John the Elder and the Ephesians? They wrote their own song about the power of love, and it was a hit, and it became a classic handed down from one generation to another. You can find the words to their song in the New Testament, in 1 John.

1 John sings of the power of love. The lyrics are fresh. The words are far more honest about love than most of the words that Hollywood scriptwriters or advertising executives make up about love. And John the Elder had style: he composed his words in “tightly braided phrases and sentences” (*C. Clifton Black, p. 432 of New Interpreter’s Bible, Vol. 12*), with a rhythm that reminds you of the rhythm that Jesus’ own words made in the Gospel of John. These words do not merely impart information; they do something to anyone who listens.

As I read from 1 John 4:7-21, I invite you to put away your own Bible, and concentrate fully on listening to the words that come to your ears. In fact, if it will help your concentration, you may even close your eyes and allow yourself to be caught up in the grandeur of the power of love. Prepare to hear the majesty of the gospel of the power of love.

(Read 1 John 4:7-21)

Two weeks ago, I was on a mission trip to an undisclosed location in the Middle East. There I saw with my own eyes the power of the love of God in a strange place. One thing that made the place strange was how open and hospitable the people were, and yet at the same time how suspicious and fearful they were of strangers and even each other.

While I was there, I spent one morning hearing one missionary pour out his heart about the difficulties of sharing the gospel in such a place. For years this pastor had wrestled with bureaucracy and suspicion among the authorities, he had struggled with deceit and bribery in the business world, he had been the object of general distrust among the public. On some days, all of the above would drive him to despair. He told me, "Honestly, there are days when I don't like this country very much." Yet within him there burned a fire to use the arts and technology to spread the gospel of Jesus Christ throughout that country. I looked at him pouring his heart out to me, and I realized that what I was seeing was the power of love. The power of love had hold of this man.

On one late afternoon, I spent a couple of hours with a new believer. He had already demonstrated great courage in the face of vicious persecution. And yet his question to me was not "How can I endure persecution?" (he knew he could do that). His question was "How can I find love?" You see, he had never known a loving family. He had never known the love of many friends. He had recently met a girlfriend, but in her own family she had known abuse instead of love, just as in his own family. His dilemma was, "How can I know love when neither I nor my girlfriend really knows how to love?" I looked at this man pouring his heart out to me, and I realized that what I was seeing was the power of love. The only real love this young man had ever known was the power of love in his new church. And now he was desperate to know that same power in the rest of his life.

Then I came home to my own country, where I give renewed thanks for the privilege of living where the rule of law is reliable (mostly), and where religious liberty thrives (for the most part). Yet even here I see a hunger for the power of love. Here at home, I listen to people pour out to me how paralyzed they are by their guilt and fear. They are desperate for the power of God's love in their lives. But they struggle with many problems, such as, "How can I love that person in my (business, family, church) whom I don't even like?"

Long, long ago, John the Elder struggled with the same kinds of problems in the land called Asia Minor (now Turkey). He cared for his church as they struggled with persecution, with family abuse and neglect, and with fear and guilt. But in the midst of all the struggle, John could see the power of love:

*Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. (1 John 4:7)*

“LOVE IS FROM GOD.” We could spend the rest of today on these four words. Love is from God. God is the source and the cause of all the love that is: the love of a mother for her child, the love of brothers and sisters, the love of friends, the love of husband and wife, all of it comes from God. If you want to know where love comes from, go to God. And if you want to know what God is like, go to love, for God is love.

Now, get ready for another astounding thought. Think now of the strongest feelings of love that you have ever known: probably your love for your family or even for your friends. Now think of this: the love of God for you is even greater than that. And for you to know that love, there is nothing you have to do. You don't have to earn it, you don't have to search for it, you don't have to understand it or figure it out on your own. You don't even have to feel it. It is already there for you. God does not wait for you to do anything. God certainly does not wait for you to be good enough to deserve it. God simply and of God's own initiative ... loves ... you and me.

#### AND WHAT IS GOD'S LOVE FOR US LIKE? IT IS LIKE JESUS:

In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. (1 John 4:10)

Christ is the center of all that is to be known about God's love. If you ask, “Just how far and how deep and how high God will go to love us?” The answer is: Jesus. In Jesus, in how he lived and how he died, we realize the incredible length to which God loves us. And remember, God went to those great lengths long before we ever had any inclination to love God.

- In Jesus we see that God's love is unconditional, for God did not wait for our love before God sent Jesus.
- In Jesus we see that God's love is sacrificial, for God sent his Son to die for our sins.
- In Jesus we see that God's love is healing and restoring and renewing. In some mysterious yet undeniably powerful way, the story of Jesus has power to close any gap between us and God. That is the nature and the power of love.

Now, another astounding thought: THE LOVE OF GOD MAKES POSSIBLE OUR LOVE FOR ONE ANOTHER. If God is the source of all love, then God is the source of our love for each other. The closer we come to God through Jesus, the more we are able to love each other. The more we love each other, the more obvious it is how close we are to God.

### 1) ANYONE WHO IS CLOSE TO GOD WILL LOVE LIKE GOD

Obviously today the love of mothers is one example. The love of mothers comes from God. Mothers who know how to love are people who are close to God. They have to be, because children are not always lovable little angels; they are just as often abominable little devils. Just watch “The Nanny” on TV, or better yet, if you have children, just watch your own living room! Anyone who has learned how to love children as they are has learned what it is like for God to love us, for we all are that same combination of lovable and abominable.

The prayer shawl ministry is another example of being close to God and loving like God. It is a very motherly act of love. Those who make these shawls feel close to God, as well as those who receive them. God is the source of the love for both. Anyone who is close to God will love like God.

### 2) AND ANYONE WHO CANNOT LOVE LIKE GOD IS NOT CLOSE TO GOD

In the comic strip Peanuts, it was Lucy Van Pelt who griped, “I love humanity; it’s people I can’t stand!” That is our struggle, is it not? And that is our evidence of estrangement from God. We cannot separate love of God from love of people. When we fail to love, we reveal the size of the gap between us and God.

Now this does not mean that if you don’t like someone you are far from God. Writer Kathy Michael explains (*Lectionary Homiletics, April-May 2006, p. 60*):

We are not called to like everyone, but we are called to love. Our own self-generated love is inadequate and fragile in the best of situations. How can we love others whom we do not like, with whom we disagree? Only God’s love can do that.

And the only way we can hope to love like that is to come closer to God. And the closer we come to God, the more we receive one further blessing:

### 3) PERFECT LOVE CASTS OUT FEAR

If there is one common theme that connects the Ephesians of the first century, and the new believers I met in the Middle East, and us believers in Wilson, it is the struggle between fear and love. All three groups of people have had to deal with or are dealing with great change and uncertainty, in our communities and in our personal lives. Depression and bewilderment and fear pursue us all like a “nagging hound of hell.” (*Martin Luther King, III, Lectionary Homiletics, April-May 2006, p. 61*) For example, one night in 1956, Martin Luther King was speaking to a congregation. He was supposed to lift them to the heights of hope, but he himself was in the depths of despair. After the meeting, an elderly lady

named Mother Pollard confronted King: “Something is wrong with you. You didn’t talk strong tonight.” And then she made him this promise: “I done told you we is with you all the way. But even if we ain’t with you, God’s gonna take care of you.” Now that was one fearless mother -- that was one loving mother. She knew that God’s love casts out fear. God’s love gives us the courage to love each other, even to love those we don’t like, even to love our enemies.

At the end of my mission trip to the Middle East, I witnessed a great moment when love cast out fear: I went to a wedding. Two native believers in that Middle Eastern city said their vows to each other in a Christian wedding. As far as everyone could remember, it was the first Christian wedding in that area between two local believers. The pastor took full advantage of the opportunity to teach the new believers the story of God’s intention for marriage, and to teach what is unique about a Christian marriage.

After the wedding, we all were invited to a reception downtown. At the reception there was a music deejay just like a deejay you would find at an American wedding. And he was playing tunes that sounded like Middle Eastern versions of Huey Lewis and the News, only twice as loud. And together we celebrated and shared cake and punch and danced the night away.

I leaned back and marveled at what I was seeing. I could look at each person and remember their stories of how they had lost their jobs or their families or more for the offence of becoming followers of Jesus Christ. I sat back and watched the missionaries who had made their own sacrifices, including that pastor who sometimes didn’t like the maddening ways of that country very much. By the look of the napkins he had wadded in his ears, he certainly didn’t like having his ears blown out by a Middle Eastern Huey Lewis. But they were all there, having the time of their lives, celebrating the love of a new husband and wife, and underneath it all, celebrating the love of the God who sent them Jesus the Christ. They were loved by God, and they knew it. They were embraced by the love of God, and they were learning how to love each other, and even to love their enemies.

The power of love is a curious thing  
 Make a one man weep, make another man sing ...  
 More than a feeling that’s the power of love ...

And it don’t take money, don’t take fame  
 Don’t need no credit card to ride this train  
 It’s strong and it’s sudden it can be cruel sometimes  
 But it might just save your life....

And with a little help from above  
 You feel the power of love

That's how Huey Lewis and the News put it. But John the Elder and the Ephesians said it even better:

*God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.*

-- Douglas E. Murray