

¹⁶ So we have known and believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. ¹⁷ Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness on the day of judgment, because as he is, so are we in this world. ¹⁸ There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. ¹⁹ We love^[b] because he first loved us. ²⁰ Those who say, "I love God," and hate their brothers or sisters,^[c] are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister^[d] whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. ²¹ The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters^[e] also.

There is a temptation to read this Scripture and preach a "feel good, let's all hold hands and sing kumbaya sermon" especially, say, when it is your very first sermon in a new congregation. We hear these comforting words: "God is love," "Love has been perfected among us," and yeah, yeah, yeah, that whole love God and our siblings' bit and we think "I am a nice person, I love most of the people I know, I am really nailing this being a Christian thing thank you very much." But then my beloved in Christ, we look past our romanticized and idealized notions of love and as we read this Scripture closely, we realize that this entire passage should come with a warning label to "handle with care."

Right off the bat John defines God. What would you do if you had to define God and record it for future generations? I can't speak for you, but I look at the problems of the world and I would create a lengthy definition. My made-up wish list of a definition would include things like: God is all powerful and capable of preventing sickness and violence. God is a God of order who lays down the law and punishes the guilty and blesses the innocent. God is a God of protection and will keep people from harm at all times and all circumstances. If I was defining God, I would have a long list of wants and needs and dare I say demands and you better believe that my defined God would always have my best interests in mind.

And yet we have John's definition of God who simply writes this "God is love." That's it. That is the whole definition that John offers us. For those of us who want the assurance that God is going to be the Band-Aid to our every problem this may feel quite lacking but the beautiful thing is that John is not promising anything he can't guarantee. Is God all powerful, yes but in John's definition we might still face sickness and violence. Is God a just God of order, yes, but in John's definition the wicked might still prevail on earth and the innocent might still be persecuted. Is God a God of protection, yes, but we may still face harm at different points. John boldly proclaims a single definition of God-that God is love and I believe in his statement he is offering us the assurance that in every situation we face- in every trial and temptation, in every heartbreak and hardship, in every unjust and unfair moment-God is still love.

And how do we know this to be true? One of the commentaries I read this week said "we don't need to guess that God is indeed love, we can look and see."

And ain't that the truth? Amen? From the very beginning of our Scriptures we can look and see God's love. We look at Adam and Eve who are filled with shame and hiding in the garden and God, in an act of love, seeks them out and clothes them. We can look at the people of Israel crying out to God as slaves in Egypt and we can see how God loved them, heard their cry, raised up Moses, and freed them from slavery. We can look at all the times God's people abandoned

God, and all the times God could have just wiped God's hands clean but then God persistently, relentlessly, kept speaking messages of hope and love through the prophets. And then we can look at Jesus and see God's perfect love take human form in a man that taught love, lived love, died for love, and rose for love's sake. Today we can look and see how Christ compels our youth and young adults to volunteer for a week of mission work, we can look and see how willing volunteers will give of their time and talent to welcome kids to Vacation Bible School and share Jesus' love, we can look and see how we care for God's creation in the gorgeous gardens around the church, we can look and see that the love of God is very much alive in us and through us even now. My family in Christ, it is true, we don't need to guess that God is love, we can look and see and know it is true.

And John goes on by saying that those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also. Now hold up. I find myself perfectly capable of loving, say my children, and not necessarily loving a stranger. I don't necessarily see how loving God means that we must love our siblings but John does not hold back. And this is not my interpretation or pastor Gina's interpretation this is the ancient Greek of this epistle... "those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also." I don't know about you but this causes me stop in my tracks and really take a look at some of my relationships and thoughts. Jesus is clear that all of God's children are our siblings and John is clear here that if we love God we must love all of them. That family member that gets under your skin, that angry person on the other side of the political aisle, that church member who hurt you years ago, the driver of that car that just cut you off...if we love God we MUST love all of them. This is where I want to circle back to the notion of holding hands and singing kumbaya. We get this idea that loving others means we have to always get along and play nice. In the words of pastor Gina, "I say nay-nay." Loving one another includes having difficult conversations, speaking our truth, holding people accountable for their words and actions, setting and sticking to boundaries, living sacrificially, and speaking up for those on the margins.

I believe that Jesus loved all people. ALL people. Jesus loved the Pharisees and scribes but when they tried to entrap him or trick him, he didn't buy into their nonsense. Jesus loved the vendors in the Temple but when they were selling things in his Father's house, Jesus literally flipped their tables over. Jesus loved the woman accused of adultery but held her accountable to going and sinning no more. Jesus shows us time and time again that loving one another may not fit nicely into a Hallmark card message but that if we do indeed love God then we must indeed love one another in all times and in all circumstances.

This week Pastor Gina asked the staff in our staff devotions to think about our "why." Why do we do what we do? Why are we passionate about serving Christ? As I have wrestled with my "why" I keep coming back to love. When I was lost and felt unloved even by my family of origin, I experienced the depths of God's love. When I look at the most poignant moments of love in my life, they have always included God and God's people. My why, while not yet fully defined, revolves around the fact that Jesus loves me and because Jesus loves me, I want to tell about this love, I want to love others with my words and actions, I want to be God's love in a world that I believe is starving for it.

But then, if I am being truly honest fear creeps in. Who am I to be God's love? I make so many mistakes. Who am I to tell about God's love when my contact folds over in my eye during my first service at a new church and I embarrass myself stumbling through communion liturgy? Who am I? In the field of psychology it is well known that these fears, and fears like these are powerful motivators. Fear is what keeps people from leaning in and being who God called them to be. Fear is what keeps people from saying yes to missions and ministries that God has called them to do. Fear is what keeps people silent when they see injustice happening around them. And to all of these fears, this "handle with care" scripture once more boldly proclaims that perfect love casts out all fear. My friends, the more we grow in God's love, the more we grow in love with our siblings, the more we tap into that divine love that is within each of us, the more perfect God's love is made manifest. And the more God's love is perfected in us, the more easily we cast out all the fears of the world. I'd like to close with one of my all-time favorite poems about these fears and invite you to consider how God's love casts out all fear. The poem is called our deepest fear by Marianne Williamson

Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate.
Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us.

We ask ourselves,
"Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous?" Actually, who are you *not* to be? You are a child of God.

Your playing small does not serve the world. There's nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you.

We are all meant to shine, as children do. We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us.
It's not just in some of us; it's in everyone.

And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same.
As we're liberated from our own fear,
our presence automatically liberates others.

God is love. Loving God means loving all of God's children. And growing in love means being liberated from fear and letting our light shine. Amen? Amen.