

Good morning New Covenant. I am grateful to be together again as we continue on this journey of learning how to better love God, each other, ourselves, and our neighbors. As we embark on chapter 5 of 1 John, let us pray together for wisdom and insight.

In the past few months, we have entered into 1 John's teachings, spiraling upward as we look at the greatest Torah commandments from different viewpoints of what does it mean to love God and love neighbor. Like in Genesis and in the gospel of John, our experience includes both light and darkness. And as we live our lives- right here in Champaign-Urbana, in the United States at this time in history- we too see both great light and acts of deep darkness. And when we are in the dark, of conflict with a close companion, of reading the news of the latest senseless atrocity, we need to lift our heads and look to the places where love is being enacted. To believe that God is over both light and dark, and that there is no darkness that is too evil, too far from God, or beyond God's reach where God's love and light cannot break through.

In 1 John, like in the gospel of John, we are repeatedly reminded that the commandments to love God and love neighbor are intricately intertwined. Loving neighbor flows out of loving God. And our ability to love God comes first from God's love for us. Love is an interplay where we experience God loving us, observe God loving our neighbors, and then reflect love back to God, and express it toward our neighbors. As we read last week at the end of chapter 4:

We love because God first loved us. If anyone says, I love God, and hates a brother or sister, he is a liar, because the person who doesn't love a brother or sister who can be seen can't love God, who can't be seen. This commandment we have from him: Those who claim to love God ought to love their brother and sister also. 1 John 4:19-21(CEB)

The language of neighbor, coming from the Torah in Leviticus, has been transformed into the language of family. In ancient Israel, people were bound together by blood. Your neighbor was part of your same tribe, whose land was next to yours by family allotment. Generations of families would live side by side, providing the opportunity for family feuds and holding grudges for misdeeds and perceived insults. But that ongoing proximity also provided the opportunity to practice love- the love that seeks first to understand, before being understood. Love that forgives. Love that recognizes one's own wrongs and shortcomings, receives God's grace, and extends that same grace to our neighbors.

Jesus expanded this meaning of neighbor from those of your own tribe, with whom you share boundary lines, to strangers in need, whose name you do not know, who may hate you- to provide care, healing, and sustenance. And so we have reflected together that as American Christians, here at New Covenant, this is our preferred expression of neighboring. We commit a surprising 30% of our income to ministries and organizations that address education, healthcare, and hunger, as well as meeting individual needs in our extended family through the family fund. Loving our neighbors through donating our money and time to strangers in need is one of our strengths.

As Bob pointed out last week, communicating with each other and resolving conflicts among ourselves is not our strongest suit. The Levitical nature of neighbor continues to challenge us. John call us *brothers and sisters*, because belief in Jesus as Messiah has opened up the family that previously seemed limited to Israel, to include those of us who are Gentiles who also desire to be children of God. This brings us back to Ron's teaching in 1 John 3:

See what kind of love the Father has given to us in that we should be called God's children, and that is what we are! Because the world didn't recognize him, it doesn't recognize us.

Dear friends, now we are God's children, and it hasn't yet appeared what we will be. We know that when he appears we will be like him because we'll see him as he is. 1 John 3:1-2(CEB)

We are now all God's children, through love, recognizing that as our common identity. And so, like in any family with a lot of kids, there are elements that the children have in common based on their parents. But each person is unique. Each kid is a different expression of those genes. The breadth of God, the unfathomable diverse creativity of love, is manifested in a multitude of different ways in the children of God. And the love we receive from God, and reflect back to God, is then extended to God's children. Which brings us to today's passage in 1 John 5:

Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Messiah has been born from God. Whoever loves someone who is a parent loves the child born to the parent. This is how we know that we love the children of God: when we love God and keep God's commandments. 1 John 5:1-2

Kevin has reminded us that 1 John is a very Jewish writing. From the vein of the gospel of John, whose writer was an observant Jewish fisherman, called to be one of Jesus' closest disciples. The Jewish faith of hard-working folks of Galilee permeated their everyday living, rather than being shaped by the elite religious establishment or sullied by collaboration with the occupying Roman government. God's commandments referenced here are the Torah, the Prophets, and the Writings- the Tanakh. When other rabbis pressed Jesus to summarize the commandments of Hebrew scriptures, he identified loving God with the whole of ourselves and loving neighbor as ourselves- which the religious leaders agreed was the correct answer. But Jesus pushed the interpretation of those commandments in different ways than was popular in religious circles of his time, and in ways that still challenge us today.

"If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. If you lend to those from whom you hope to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to receive as much again. But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful. Luke 6:32-36 (NRSV)

The language of family that John uses, or the language of neighbor that Leviticus uses, might allow us some wiggle room in defining who is our neighbor or who is the brother or sister that we are required to love. Jesus extends this commandment. God loves, and is kind to, the ungrateful and the wicked. Those who do not reflect love back to God or to other people.

Showing mercy where it is not deserved or appreciated. Just as God has shown us and continues to show mercy to those who neither acknowledge God, recognize God's blessings on their life, or thank God for the good things they receive. This is the language of *us* and *them*, which differs from that of brother, sister, and neighbor whom we acknowledge to be like us in some way- by blood, by tribe, by belief, by proximity. These are those whose very outlook on the world and way of living is anathema to us.

In today's climate, this most frequently applies to those on the opposite side of the political aisle from us. Particularly, people who may look like us, but think differently and act in ways that seem to go against everything we believe about how our world should be run. We prefer to love the widow, the stranger, the orphan- imagining that we think alike, seeing our common humanity. And of course we love those who love the same ideas we love, those people are easy to love. They are our modern tribe, the people with whom we are friends on social media, those whose ideas are most like ours- that is to say- "correct", right, righteous. Our connection to them may be the easiest- we don't actually share property lines to squabble over the raking of the unending deluge of leaves, we don't necessarily live in faith community with them, where our personality differences begin to grate against each other. They may look different from us, but by golly we agree on what's important, and that is the best basis, the easiest basis, for love. Let's look at the Message version of this sentiment in Matthew.

Matthew 5:43-48 The Message (MSG)

43-47 "You're familiar with the old written law, 'Love your friend,' and its unwritten companion, 'Hate your enemy.' I'm challenging that. I'm telling you to love your enemies. Let them bring out the best in you, not the worst. When someone gives you a hard time, respond with the energies of prayer, for then you are working out of your true selves, your God-created selves. This is what God does. He gives his best—the sun to warm and the rain to nourish—to everyone, regardless: the good and bad, the nice and nasty. If all you do is love the lovable, do you expect a bonus? Anybody can do that. If you simply say hello to those who greet you, do you expect a medal? Any run-of-the-mill sinner does that.

48 "In a word, what I'm saying is, Grow up. You're kingdom subjects. Now live like it. Live out your God-created identity. Live generously and graciously toward others, the way God lives toward you."

Is this how we are behaving towards our political enemies- letting them bring out the best in us, not the worst? Are we responding with the energies of prayer? Do we greet those who would just as soon not speak to us, with whom we seem to have nothing in common, and are working against everything we believe in? This calling is different than what we see being lived out in the world around us. We live in a world where it is perfectly acceptable to love your political allies and hate your political enemies. These are the ways of the world which are not love, according to 1 John, not according to God's commandments, not according to Jesus' revelation of those Torah truths:

Every God-begotten person conquers the world's ways. The conquering power that brings the world to its knees is our faith. The person who wins out over the world's ways is simply the one who believes Jesus is the Son of God.

Jesus—the Divine Christ! He experienced a life-giving birth and a death-killing death. Not only birth from the womb,

but baptismal birth of his ministry and sacrificial death. And all the while the Spirit is confirming the truth, the reality of God's presence at Jesus' baptism and crucifixion, bringing those occasions alive for us. A triple testimony: the Spirit, the Baptism, the Crucifixion. And the three in perfect agreement. 1 John 5:4-8 (MSG)

There is a bigger reality than our political affiliations- life, death, and resurrection. And we are called to live into a love that is beyond the world's ways, where our ideological differences become ego conflicts (as Bob explained last week) so that our identities are so wrapped up in our conflict that we can no longer see, recognize, or love the other- our enemy.

One of the speakers at the Christian Community Development Assoc conference that many of us attended offered a fascinating and challenging insight. They said liberals are more likely to work for prison reform- challenging mass incarceration, the racism that underlies our criminal justice system, imprisoning of the poor and mentally ill. But that conservative Christians are more likely to actually visit people in prison- strangers, perhaps without hope, desperate and alone. When I allow myself to realize that I have never personally visited anyone in prison- someone known to me or a stranger- I quickly become defensive. (I vote! I go to CCDA and listen. Isn't it more important to work for system reform? Etc). But Jesus says that when the nations stand before the Son of Man, his acceptance speech will conclude with these words:

"I was in prison and you visited me." Matthew 25:36

Jesus wasn't talking about prison reform. Or whether those in prison deserved to be there. Whether the crime committed was poverty or skin color. He said he was in prison, and we visited him. Now this is obviously a complex and nuanced subject, about which many of us feel quite strongly, for good reasons, and we are inclined to get defensive at this over-simplification. So let us not get side-tracked from the topic of loving our (political) enemies, whether or not there might be some good in their approach to the problems of the world. Perhaps there is none. Perhaps they are just straight up wicked. But God continues to send rain and sun and mercy on them anyway. And we are called to love them, anyway.

This calling- to love each other right here in this fellowship, through all the inevitable conflict, to love our actual next-door neighbors, to love the stranger whose very life depends on our generous gifts of money and time, and to love our enemies who might be most quickly identified as members of the opposite political party- seems difficult. And I think we need to be challenged and stretched by this. But somewhat strangely, I felt that the word from the Lord for us today is hidden unexpectedly in the challenge of 1 John 5:3 that is on the cover of your bulletins:

This is the love of God: we keep God's commandments. God's commandments are not difficult,

Harkening us back again to the Torah, where Moses speaks similar words to the children of Israel:

This commandment that I'm giving you right now is definitely not too difficult for you. It isn't unreachable. It isn't up in heaven somewhere so that you have to ask, "Who will go up for us to heaven and get it for us that we can hear it and

do it?" Nor is it across the ocean somewhere so that you have to ask, "Who will cross the ocean for us and get it for us that we can hear it and do it?" Not at all! The word is very close to you. It's in your mouth and in your heart, waiting for you to do it. Deuteronomy 30:11-14 (CEB)

We are to be encouraged because these commandments of love are not far off, up in heaven or on the other side of the ocean. They are in our mouths and in our hearts, waiting for us to do them. The world's ways do not control us. We are not bound by the morality around us that encourages hatred of our enemies. We are children of God. Through faith in Jesus, who spoke truth to the powers of the world and showed mercy to people on the margins. Whom the system of the world killed, but God raised to life to be our hope in the way of love and life eternal.

It is in this hope that we remember together the Lord's death around the communion tables. Jesus was executed by his political enemies, and yet he asked his Father to forgive them for their ignorance that ignited violence. God's love for us- while we were yet God's enemies- is transformative. May we be transformed by that love, that we too may reflect it to neighbor and to enemy. Let us pray.