



FIRST
PRESBYTERIAN
CHURCH
SPARTANBURG

EXPERIENCING GOD THROUGH LOVE

1 John 4:7-21

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In 1962, the great 20th century theologian German theologian Karl Barth was visiting the United States, when, and someone asked him to summarize his whole life's theological work...in one sentence. Now what you have to know is that Karl Barth was one of those scholars who subscribed to the idea of: why write one word, when you can write 1,000 instead! His massive theological opus, *Church Dogmatics* is a 31-volume beast that takes up a couple shelves. It's a great, but it is not for the faint of heart! Karl Barth is also the author of "The Theological Declaration of Barmen", one of the statements of faith in our Book of Confessions. He was one of the principle voices of Neo-orthodoxy, which was arguably the most significant Christian theological movement of the 20th century!

In 1962, when Karl Barth was asked to summarize his massive theological work in one sentence (in English for us Americans, not in his native German), he answered, "Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so!" "Jesus Loves Me" – that was his answer! Well that was a whole lot easier than the months I spent reading just about a quarter of his *Church Dogmatics* in seminary!

Now I don't know if that was just flippant silly answer to what Barth might have considered a silly question, but, honestly, I doubt it. That doesn't seem like his style. He may have had a habit of writing 1,000 words when only a few would do, but he also chose each and every one of those 1,000 words very, very carefully! And "Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so!" does sort of summarize a lot of what he had to say.

And you know, he's not wrong! There's no more fundamental truth in all of Christianity than the simple assertion that God loves us – God loves me, you, and everyone - unconditionally! "For God so loved the world, that he sent his only-begotten Son." Seems like I've read that somewhere, before!

And the passage I just read twice makes the bold theological statement that "God is love."

There is nothing more fundamental to the very being of God than love. You can take all those big impressive-sounding Greek theological ideas, like omniscience, omnipotence, omnipresence, immutability, impassibility, and eternity and give them all a back seat to the simple concept of love. St. Augustine, who was no theological slouch himself, went as far as to say that any interpretation of any passage of the Bible that contradicts Jesus's command to love, is just flat out wrong.

Last Sunday was Trinity Sunday, and for me, more than any ontological understanding of the nature of the being God, the doctrine of the Trinity says that in God's very being, God is in loving relationship. The very nature of God is to love!

And that love of God is unconditional! I hope that you already know that, but we really can't say it enough – God loves you, unconditionally! God loves you not for what you have done or for what you will do, but God loves you because you are a beloved child of God. There's nothing you can do to earn God's love and nothing you can do to lose it. God...just...loves...you! Period!

But even if the fundamental nature of God is love, then how do we experience God's love – how do we experience God? Contrary to the claims of more therapeutic approaches to Christianity, we don't experience God by building up our self-worth. Don't get me wrong, there is nothing in the universe that gives us more intrinsic value than our status as beloved children of God, but the old Saturday Night Live line, "I'm good enough, and smart enough, and doggonit people like me." – that's actually not a good way to find God!

No, in fact, quite the opposite! We are more likely to experience God when we realize that we are not good enough, not smart enough, and not even all that likeable sometimes. And we engage in the practice of confession of sin and receiving God's forgiveness, as we do in almost every Sunday service in the Sanctuary. But even then, we sometimes struggle to experience God.

Now I'll tell you that I have had powerful experiences of the love and the presence of God through heartfelt confession to God, when that sense of God's amazing love has washed over me. I will never forget one evening worship at the Montreat Youth Conference when I was in high school, when I just felt utterly lost in my failures to resist the very same temptations over and over and over again. And we started singing "Here I Am Lord," that quintessential youth hymn of my generation. And right when we got to the lines:

I, the Lord of snow and rain
I have borne my people's pain
I have wept for love of them
They turn away
I will break their hearts of stone
Give them hearts for love alone
I will speak my words to them
Whom shall I send?

Just then the skies above Montreat just opened up – and it just started pouring down rain – kind of like it did here yesterday afternoon. And the wind blew through the open windows of Anderson Auditorium bringing that smell of fresh rain into the building, and in that moment, I experienced God's love through God's forgiveness in a way I never have before or since. And the tears streamed down my face as that rain streamed down the windows of Anderson Auditorium in Montreat.

But I have to tell you, that doesn't happen every day. That assurance of pardon we just did earlier in the service, and that we do almost every week in worship doesn't bring me into God's presence that same way every week. Don't get me wrong, I think that is an important and necessary movement in

the first part of the service as we prepare ourselves to hear God's word. But some weeks – many weeks – it feels kind of perfunctory. I would never argue to get rid of it – quite the opposite, as it puts me in the proper place to listen for God's word to me. I have great appreciation for the rich meaning of our order of worship. But if you were to ask me if I experience God in deep and profound ways in that part of the service every week, honestly, I would have to say no.

But do you want to know where I do experience God's presence and God's love, almost without fail? It's through doing acts of love. When I get over myself, and my own wants and priorities, and my own fears, and I show love to someone else – in those words and actions I almost always experience God, sometimes in small but noticeable ways, and sometimes in really big ways!

Listen again to a few selected verses from our passage from 1 John, chapter 4:

Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us. God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them."

(1 John 4:7, 8, 12, 16b)

It's right there over and over in the passage from 1 John, chapter 4, and my experience bears it out, too. If you want to experience God, then show love to others.

And this isn't a codependent kind of love where we give love to others in the hope and expectation that they will show appreciation and maybe even love back to us. That response doesn't even happen, and some of the most loving acts are done anonymously, where there's no chance of that kind of response. No, what I'm talking about doesn't depend on how anyone else responds to our acts of love – it's more intrinsic than that. What I am

talking about is that in those acts of love – even in those loving thoughts and intentions – we experience God because we participate in the very nature of who God is!

1 John says, “everyone who loves is born of God and knows God,” and “Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love.” Maybe you read that as a cause and effect statement: if we know God then that will cause us to love others, and that love is the observable evidence of our knowledge of God. And I think that’s true, but I think it goes equally well the other way – that loving others will cause us to know God more fully, because God is love.

Loving others and knowing God are so intrinsically connected that we cannot have one without the other. We cannot know God without loving others, and if we recognize God as the source of love, then we cannot love others without also knowing God. And that’s not just knowing about God; it is knowing God in a deeply meaningful way. Because the only reason we know how to love – the only reason we even have love to share – the only reason can love – is that we have first been loved by others and by God –because that love of God is mediated to us through others. Once again, it’s right there in 1 John: “We love because he first loved us.”

We Presbyterian sometimes like to make things complicated. We say that we are people of the middle way, and there is often important nuance in what we say. But there is no nuance here. This isn’t complicated. This is one thing that is very simple. If you want to know God – I mean really know God, not just know about God – then love others. Love others and you will experience God. It really is that simple! Because in loving others we participate in the very being of God and draw near to the very heart of God.

Glory be to the Father, who loved us enough to send God’s only Son into the world that we might have life – truly live – through him, to the Son who

revealed God’s love for us, and to the Holy Spirit who still moves us to love, even today. Amen.