



May 8 2016

A Sermon by Brent J. Eelman

"Perfect Love"

I John 4: 7-21

Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. ⁸ Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. ⁹ 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. ¹⁰ 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. ¹¹ Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. ¹² No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.

¹³ By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit. ¹⁴ And we have seen and do testify that the Father has sent his Son as the Savior of the world. ¹⁵ God abides in those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God, and they abide in God. 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 because he first loved us. ²⁰ 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. ²¹ The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also..

A colleague shared with me the story of a man who was invited to the wedding of a girl he befriended in college but whom he had not seen in several years. Due to distance and schedules, he regretted being unable to attend. Instead, he sent the following telegram due to arrive on the wedding day. "On this special day, I wish you the best. Always remember the words of I JOHN 4:18. One of your many friends, Jim." As the telegram was being copied, the clerk, thinking the "I JOHN" was a misprint, simply omitted the "I" making the text John 4:18. The couple received the telegram but instead of reading the intended the 1 JOHN text, "There is no fear in love but perfect love drives out fear..." the bride, quickly fetching a Bible, leafed through it and read aloud JOHN 4:18. "The fact is, you have had five husbands, and the man you now have is not your husband!"

"There is no fear in love but perfect love drives out fear..."

On this Mother's day, a sermon on love seems appropriate. John made three points in the letter I just read.

First, God is love.

Second, love is power.

Third, we must love one another.

I believe that those words are just as fresh today as when they came from John's pen almost 2000 years ago.

God is love. The first paragraph of the text illustrates the relationship between God's love and human love. This explanation is amazing because John unequivocally stated that God is love. He did not write "God has a lot of love." He did not write "One of the characteristics of God is love." He did not write "Sometimes God is a loving God." He wrote, "God is love."

Theologians often come up with a host of different definitions of God. Paul Tillich referred to God as "the ultimate concern." Others have referred to God as the "prime mover" or the "original cause". How do we describe God? We use words like

- "mighty",
- "powerful",
- "Sovereign",
- and "Ruler".

John said that God may be all of these things, but first and foremost God is love.

Love is the one quality that identifies God.

Love is the very essence of God's being.

Love is the very nature of God's actions.

Love is the heart of God's Word.

Love... perfect love, "for God is love."

Love is why God became a human being, Jesus. *Love* was revealed to us in Jesus. *Love* was reason Jesus died for our sins. God's essence and actions are love. If we know God, we love others, because that is what we know about God. If we believe in God, we love others because this love of God lives in us, and is expressed in us. God is love, and so we who know God, should love one another.

These are beautiful words: glorious words, but do you know why John wrote them to a church? Because some members of that congregation were upset and angry and left. Commentators describe it as "a mutiny". Church fights are not a modern phenomenon. People get angry all the time. People walk out on their families, their communities, their friends and also their churches. It seems like such a common thing, and this is precisely the extraordinary nature of this teaching. Love should permeate our behavior, even at the most ordinary and mundane levels. Love is not an abstraction, it is linked with real people: people who are not perfect, who sin, who hurt, who do dumb things... John did not say love all of humanity... he told these people to love the very real person next to them.

He tells us to love our neighbor... and that begins with the person in the next pew, the next cubicle at work, the driver who is less than considerate on the highway... John tells us to love our very real, in the flesh, neighbors.

II

Love is power. Power: what do we think of today when we speak of power? Tornadoes and hurricanes are powerful. The ocean is powerful. Armies are powerful. Guns and bombs are powerful. Nations are powerful. Power is usually identified with the ability to damage, hurt or harm.

"Be careful with that car," my father would tell me, "it can be a powerful weapon when used carelessly". Cars are powerful.

All these things are powerful, but love is more powerful. Think about it. Power, by its very nature, causes fear. We are afraid of the power that is in the hands of a criminal with a gun. We are afraid of the power that nations might wield recklessly. We are afraid when we learn of the impending hurricane, blizzard or tornado. Power has a way of engendering fear. We live with a great deal of fear these days. Fear comes in all shapes and sizes. It can be anxiety; it can be a phobia.... More often than not it is the day to day dread with which we all live. During an election year, fear is stoked by campaigns and anxiety is multiplied.

Love is more powerful. Perfect love casts out fear. Love casts out fear!

But ministers are supposed to say that, after all we have a rather soft view of reality. We tend to be idealists, and our sermons have a way of sounding like the Beatles... "love, love, love... all you need is love." Christian love is not utopian idealism! It is a realistic, hopeful alternative to the cauldron of fear that is currently be stirred.

Perfect love casts out fear. Love is more powerful than armies and bombs, nations and tyrants. An empirical examination of history bears me out. The emperor Nero had all the power of the world. Yet he lived in fear... He blamed the Christians for his troubles and began persecuting them. He used them as human torches to light his garden parties. Nero has come and gone. Rome is no longer a mighty empire. And where those crosses held burning Christians there now stands a church that witnesses to the continuing power of Christian faith. Love manifest in the faith of the martyrs trumped the power of the emperor and the greatest empire of its day. The "glory of Rome" is now a rubble of ruins, that we visit as tourists.

More recently we may look at the former Soviet Union. In 1917, at the time of the communist revolution, there were no Baptists in the USSR. When the Soviet Union collapsed there were over 17 million! This, in a state that systematically tried to rid society of religion! Where did they come from? How did they survive?

Perfect love casts out fear.

III

We must love. Christians often talk about love better than we live it. Love is a great and noble idea, but we don't usually act on it. The words of John should echo in our souls: "Sisters and brothers, love one another."

John challenges us. "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." These are strong words! This is the challenge of this gospel that we strive to believe and live. This is the challenge of following Jesus. He looked from the cross, at his brothers and sisters who hated him and were killing him and said, "forgive them." He didn't agree with the Pharisees, yet he could sit down and enjoy a meal with them. He didn't approve of the behavior of the tax collectors but he sought them out, loved them and offered them the good news of salvation.

Perfect love casts out fear.

Every now and then, I have these moments of fear and panic. Usually it occurs when I am reading the newspaper. There is a lot going wrong in the world, and there are a thousand good reasons to fear. I sometimes feel that same fear when I ponder the future of the church for there are so many challenges that we face. Often, in the midst of these panicked moments, I forget the good news and give myself over to my fears. My doctor says this isn't good for me. She is right. There is not a pill for this, just love... perfect love.... Love that casts out fear....

My Christian friends: Love one another and do not be afraid! This is the good news of the gospel. Amen.