

A Fresh Look at Love
Selections from 1John 4 October 8, 2017
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What with Kerstynn moving off to Georgia to begin her married life, I've found myself thinking a lot about the meaning of love.

What do we mean by this word we toss around so casually?

Hallmark cards and Facebook postings are thick with proclamations of love, yet most of us stammer when asked to define it.

When we feel swept away by its trance, we say that we "fall in love" – yet it often dissipates within months.

Why's that?

And why do we feel something is wrong with our relationship when we no longer feel infatuated with our partner?

Half of our marriages end in divorce with heartbroken couples saying they've just "fallen out of love".

I've experienced the emotional wreckage left in the wake of a divorce, and I know that millions of people are living in pain and guilt because their own marriage is failing.

And really the kind of love we are talking about today is not just the romantic variety.

We are talking about the quality of relationships within families, and between friends and colleagues.

So, what is love?

1John 4:16 may be the most well-known verse in the entire Bible, so let's begin right there: *God is love.*

You can experience love, but you cannot touch love.

If you've been in our church long enough to remember Nick and Elsie, who were married more than sixty years, you will remember how they loved each other.

To me, they were a model of love.

But you couldn't point to something and say, "Right there, that's their love."

Sounds silly to even say that.

In the *Road Less Travelled*, M. Scott Peck defined love as giving of yourself for the good or growth of someone else.

You can act in love, your life can be guided by love, your life is given meaning because you love, but love is not a "thing" you can point to or hold in your hand - it is not an object.

In fact, as soon as we try to make love into something tangible, it disappears.

Hold that thought because I'll come back to that in a minute.

Paul Tillich was one of the most influential Christian theologians of the 20th Century.

Tillich once wrote that an atheist may be closer to comprehending God than theist.

In other words, Tillich said that someone who doesn't believe that there is a divine being may be closer to understanding God than a devout believer.

That's an outlandish statement.

How could one of the most respected *Christian* theologians say that an atheist has the inside track to God?

What did he mean?

Well, you have to read on through some rather dense material, but eventually you get what Tillich was bringing to the table – and with it insights for our relationships.

Tillich says that the problem with theism is that to some extent or other, it objectifies God.

We all agree that God is infinite, ineffable ... even when we speak of God in metaphors and anthropomorphic language, we understand that God is really mystery beyond words.

And, God is everywhere, in everything.

Theism is a philosophical construct of God; in some way or another it sees God as some-*thing* out there.

In objectifying God, we perceive ourselves standing outside of God from where we can contain, poke and prod, and put God under a microscope.

It's human nature to try to put the infinite, ineffable mystery of the divine into a box that we can define, analyze, explain, and manipulate.

It helps us feel more secure and in control to think we have God neatly wrapped up.

But whenever we objectify God, we limit God, we make God small.

When we objectify God, we worship our feeble models of God, rather than surrendering to the mystery of the divine, and rather than allowing ourselves to be immersed in God's presence, and swept along in God's mission.

Follow me for a minute; I promise not to stay too abstract.

The foundation of Christianity is the Holy Trinity: Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit.

More accurately, Christianity says that God is not just the Father, not just the Son and not just the Holy Spirit – God is all three in relationship with one another.

Relationship is the key word.

People get all caught up in questions about how can God be three persons, but that question misses the subtlety and mystery of the Trinity.

Essential to the Trinity is the love that circulates between them.

As John said, *God is love*.

No one can climb into the heavens and see or touch the Father, the Son or the Holy Spirit.

God is in the continuous flow of their love between them, and it is that love that sustains creation, and that gives meaning and beauty to life.

In the sense of God not being a tangible *some-thing* out there, in that same way love doesn't exist as a *some-thing*.

You cannot see, taste, smell, hear or feel love.

That means that love is not the person we love.

That's so obvious, but let me say it again: love is not the person we love ... but that misperception has been bred into us, and it leads us into so much disappointment and pain.

Rather than being the person we love, love is that which bestows beauty on them and meaning to our relationship.

Let me explain with an example of what happens when we confuse love with the object of our love.

Some years ago, I did a little counseling with a couple whose ten-year marriage had turned into a nightmare.

These were two really nice people who had "fallen head over heels" for one another, created a beautiful daughter – and slowly had drifted apart, then quarreled a bit, then truly hated one another.

The husband looked forward more to his out-of-town business trips than to being at home.

His wife had tried to rekindle their lost passion with some romantic dinners, walks on the beach and such, but every attempt fell flat, leaving her hurt and humiliated.

Yet just a dozen years earlier, romantic dinners and walks on the beach had felt magical.

She privately told me that in the beginning she believed with all her heart that this guy made her complete – that he was everything she had dreamed of.

He even gave her one of those "half heart" necklaces – you know, where the middle part of the pendant is a split heart that's all jagged, and she wore one half

and he the other, and if you were to hold the two halves together they would fit together perfectly.

He privately told me that the moment he laid eyes on this young woman he was infatuated.

She was so beautiful that he assumed that she was “out of his league”, and he was electrified when she responded to him.

“She was perfect”, he said. “Perfect.”

And right there was the seed of their future pain and divorce.

Why?

Because it is idolatry to think that something or someone is perfect, and idolatry to think that someone can make us whole.

In fact, to idolize someone is oppressive because it is saying that I will love you because you seem perfect to me, but we each know that we cannot live up to that impossible standard.

And over time, that can morph into a toxic, “I will love you as long as you seem perfect to me.”

Gain weight, lose your job, express a differing opinion – whatever – and our relationship could be over.

We’ve all done this in some way or other – but when we objectify love as a person or a thing it will always fail.

We think we will be whole once we have that person ... or that house, or that job, or whatever.

But that person we’ve idolized will eventually reveal themselves to be oh, so human.

They will leave the toilet seat up, clog the sink with mats of hair, yammer on and on about things we aren’t interested in, and reveal other flaws and fears.

They cannot make us whole or complete – and to think they can is idolatry.

But, if we see that person as an icon (rather than an idol), then they can draw into a cycle of love – which is a learned and chosen behavior that gives life beauty and meaning.

Think cycle of love, and you are thinking of the Trinity – the cycle of love between the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Now you are imitating God.

1John 4:12 No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and His love is made complete in us.

In a religious sense and properly viewed, an icon is not worshipped.

An icon does not answer prayers.

An icon is not the source of anything.

An icon draws us into something greater, something beyond the physical.

Religious icons are used for contemplation, like portraits of saints or symbols of virtues that open our spirits to greater truths.

Think of your computer.

You click on an icon and it opens up a different place.

So, seeing another person as an icon of love means moving beyond their physicality, beyond expecting them to be perfect, or to be the source of your wholeness.

To recognize them as an icon is to see them as a gateway into a relationship where love is learned and practiced between imperfect you and imperfect them.

The ultimate purpose of life is to grow toward being more like Christ.

God wants us to take all the good times and hard times that our relationships throw at us and for us to use them to build our Godly character.

God wants you to become more loving, more forgiving, more patient ... and how do you do that?

When everything is going great and everyone is sweet and cooperative it is natural to feel loving.

But we really learn to love when our family and friends act unlovable, unreasonable and uncompromising.

It's easy to feel forgiving while we are unhurt and secure.

But we learn to be forgiving when we've leaned on the power of Christ to move through times of hurt and betrayal.

A perfect friend or partner – even if there were such a thing – would not give us the raw edges to hone our love.

Maybe that half heart pendant should have jagged edges that don't fit perfectly together to remind us that we are with that person to learn to understand, forgive and grow through our differences.

As a matter of fact, the joy of life comes from experiencing the growth that sometimes comes through difficulty and challenges.

How many times have you heard someone say that it was the years of building a business that were their best years?

How many times have you heard a couple reminisce about the years when they were getting started, struggling to make ends meet and before they had the nice furniture and appliances?

To idolize someone is to say, "You are perfect."

To love someone is to say, "You are perfect in all your imperfection."

To idolize someone is to say, "You make me complete."

To love someone is to gaze beyond the physical into the infinite complexity of their life and soul.

That is experiencing the divine.

1 John 4:16b *Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God is in them.*

Think of a flock of sheep.

Each sheep recognizes that it is surrounded by other sheep, but the other sheep mean nothing to them beyond just being there, maybe competing for food, or bumping into them as they are herded along.

That's our normal mode of seeing other people while we're shopping at Ralphs or limping down the 405.

People are there, we see them, but they're just someones.

But love transforms a someone into a unique person of value.

Love is what renders someone valuable, meaningful and cherished.

I remember the evening that my son Ian was born.

During the time Sylvia was pregnant, I was excited about the idea of having a baby and being a dad and everything.

But the moment I laid eyes on him, all wrinkled and pink, my world changed.

In that instant something new was created as love bonded us.

Without question, I would die for him.

Without question, I would work and sacrifice for his wellbeing.

In that instant, my life had new meaning.

Not because he was cute and had ten perfect fingers and ten perfect toes, but because of love.

So, to love someone – and we're not just talking about romantic or familial relationships – is to embrace their imperfection, to take all their grit and grim and give it infinite worth.

That is what love does ... it creates something new and meaningful out of what had been ordinary.

Love enlightens and empowers us to embrace someone whom we know so well that we no longer harbor any illusion of their perfection ... someone who has disappointed us and failed us and hurt us.

Love creates a relationship of value by giving worth to the finite.