

Measured by 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. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. 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. 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. Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us. By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit.

And we have seen and do testify that the Father has sent his Son as the Savior of the world. God abides in those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God, and they abide in God. 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.

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. 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. We love because he first loved 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. The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.

A wonderful book 14 Cows for America begins with an unusual ceremony in western Kenya back in June 2002. Kimeli, a young Kenyan, returns to his Maasai village from California, where he's studying molecular biology at Stanford University. He wears khaki pants, a white T-shirt, and red Stanford University jacket. When he arrives, all the village children run out to meet him. He touches each head, a warrior's traditional greeting.

The Maasai were once feared warriors. Now they live peaceably as nomadic cattle herders. They treat their cows as kindly as their children. They sing to them. They give them names. They shelter the young ones in their homes. Without the herd, the tribe might starve. To the Maasai, the cow is life.

There is a joyful reunion with Kimeli's old friends and family. The entire tribe gathers under an acacia tree, in a tradition as old as the Maasai, to hear a story. Kimeli tells the story that has burned a hole in his heart.

There is a terrible stillness as the tale unfolds. With growing disbelief, men, women, and children listen. Buildings so high they can touch the sky? Fires so hot they can melt iron? Smoke and dust so thick they can block out the sun? The story ends. More than three thousand souls are lost.

A great silence falls over the Maasai. Kimeli waits. He knows his people. They are fierce when provoked, and easily moved to kindness when they hear of suffering or injustice. At last, an elder speaks. He is shaken, but above all else, he is sad. "What can we do for these poor people?" Nearby, a cow lows. Heads turn toward the herd. "To the Maasai," Kimeli says softly, "the cow is life."

Kimeli offers his cow. The elders nod; others do the same. The tribe sends word to the United States Embassy in Nairobi. A diplomat is dispatched by Land Rover; he is hot and tired. He expects a complaint from the village elders. Instead it is a ceremony: hundreds of Maasai in their brilliant red tunics; young warriors dance, leaping into the air; women sing songs.

The people gather on a sacred knoll; the elders chant a blessing. The Maasai people of Kenya present... fourteen cows for America. "Because... there is no nation so powerful it cannot be wounded, nor a people so small they cannot offer mighty comfort."

The sacred, healing cows are still in Kenya, in the care of a village elder. They have calved and the herd keeps growing. They continue to be a symbol of life and hope and love, "from the Maasai to their brothers and sisters in America."

"No people so mighty they cannot be wounded... No people so small they cannot offer comfort and love." 14 Cows for America is a parable for our church and this time we live in. The haunting words: "No people so mighty they cannot be wounded..." speaks to this moment when more people in America are dying per day from COVID than all who died on September 11th. When potentially more deadly variants of the virus are spreading faster than vaccines can be distributed.

To bring it closer to home, those haunting words "No people so mighty they cannot be wounded..." speaks to us about the 3,000 people in our valley. We are surrounded by people who are physically, emotionally and spiritually wounded. There are people next door who are hurting and suffering, who are lonely and in need of a friend, who are hungry and thirsty, who are sad and grieving, who are afraid and guilty, who feel unworthy of God's love.

In the face of such pain and anguish what can you and I do? Remember there are "no people so small they cannot offer comfort and love." When I hear those powerful words, I realize that we, like the Maasai, have something to offer. Like the Maasai, we can offer that which gives us life. We can offer God's love in what we say and do.

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. 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... Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another.

In her book Speaking of Faith, Krista Tippett learned about God's love when she served as a student chaplain in seminary. She was assigned to an Alzheimer's and dementia ward of a local hospital. She said the patients she visited "would ask me my name but never remember it. They were not interested in my background and education. They only wanted to know if I was kind and gentle, patient and a good listener." Krista realized there was nothing tangible she could do for them or give them. "I could come and love them as they were, and this was my greatest gift to them. But they gave me far more." She wrote, "When all is said and done, none of us will be measured by how much we accomplished, but on how well we love."

As followers of Jesus, you and I are measured by love, and together as community of faith we are measured by love. Our church isn't measured by the size of our membership or budget. Our church isn't measured by the shape of our facility or the beauty of our music or the quality of my preaching. Our church isn't measured by the orthodoxy of its beliefs or the purity of its people. Our church is measured, first and foremost, by love - how much of God's love are we pouring back into the world.

Over the past 140 years, the Jemez Springs Community Presbyterian Church has been pouring God's love back into this valley. In the early years it served as the medical, educational and spiritual center of the village. In addition to being the clinic, school and church, we have served this community as the post office, library and public meeting place.

In more recent years, we have poured out God's love through our worship services and bible studies, the food pantry, vacation bible school, the after-school program, community youth group, our recovery ministries with AA, Alanon, and NA and the use of our facility by community groups like Jemez Aging in Place. The counseling Sally Hunter provides and my pastoral work of listening, talking and praying with for people who will never darken the doors of our church are ways we pour out God's love.

We have a very clear identity as the "Community" Presbyterian Church of Jemez Springs. But we cannot rest on our laurels. We are called to pour God's love each and every year. So how will we do that during our 140th year of ministry and mission?

You may look at your screen and wonder, share God's love? How can we do that during this pandemic? We're a small congregation with limited resources. We're too few and too isolated. Pouring out God's love costs and we're barely making it financially. How can we possibly share God's love in some meaningful or measurable way?

How indeed? Remember our parable? There are "no people so mighty they cannot be wounded... no people so small they cannot offer comfort and love." Friends, God isn't concerned with our numbers. God is only concerned with our love and how we share that love in our words and deeds even when we have to wear masks and social distance.

As the writer of I John reminds us, 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. There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear... We love because he first loved 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. The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.

When this passage speaks about love, it uses a Greek word – agape. It's the most transcendent kind of love. It's a love that goes beyond physical attraction or sibling connection. Agape is how God loves - unconditionally, passionately, relentlessly. You and I can't earn this kind of love. It is a free gift that always bestows worth on the one who is loved.

Agape love is hard to imagine. Maybe the best analogy is that of a parent's love for a child. It's a love that persists even when the child misbehaves or gets into serious trouble. It's a love that bestows importance and value to the child.

This is how God loves the world and each one of us. It's the kind of love that allows us to love the same way. When we realize how much God loves us, when we realize how much worth and value God instills in us, we are filled with agape for everybody and everything. When this happens, we can't help but radiate God's love to those around us.

In his book, Craddock Stories, the late Rev. Dr. Fred Craddock, tells a personal story about his father's experience with God's love. He wrote: "My mother took us to church and Sunday School; my father didn't go. He complained about Sunday dinner being late when she came home. Sometimes the preacher would call, and my father would say, 'I know what the church wants. Church doesn't care about me. Church wants another name, another pledge. Right?' That's what he always said."

"Sometimes we'd have a revival. Pastor would bring the evangelist and say to him, "there's one now, sic him, get him," and my father would say the same thing every time. My mother in the kitchen, always nervous, in fear of flaring tempers, of somebody being hurt. And always my father would say, 'The church doesn't care about me. The church wants another name and another pledge.' I guess I heard it a thousand times."

"One time he didn't say it. He was in the veteran's hospital, and he was down to 73 pounds. They'd taken out his throat, and said, "It's too late." I flew in to see him. He couldn't speak, couldn't eat. I looked around the room, potted plants and cut flowers on all the window sills, a stack of cards, 20 inches deep beside his bed. All the flowers, every card, every blossom were from persons or groups from the church."

"He saw me read a card. He couldn't speak, so he took a Kleenex box and wrote on the side of it. He wrote a line from Shakespeare: 'In this harsh world, draw your breath in pain to tell my story.' I said, 'What is your story, Daddy?' He wrote, 'I was wrong.'"

Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.

Remember there are "no people so mighty they cannot be wounded... no people so small they cannot offer comfort and love." We are measured by our love. How we will love during this 140th year of ministry and mission?

I John 4:7-21
January 31, 2021 (Annual State of Church)
David Whiteley, Pastor
Jemez Springs Community Presbyterian Church