

Three Very Important Words

February 12, 2023

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1 John 4:7-21

My beloved friends, let us continue to love each other since love comes from God. Everyone who loves is born of God and experiences a relationship with God. The person who refuses to love doesn't know the first thing about God, because God is love—so you can't know (God) if you don't love. This is how God showed... love for us: God sent (the) only Son into the world so we might live through him. This is the kind of love we are talking about—not that we once upon a time loved God, but that (God) loved us and sent (the) Son as a sacrifice to clear away our sins and the damage they've done to our relationship with God.

My dear, dear friends, if God loved us like this, we certainly ought to love each other. No one has seen God, ever. But if we love one another, God dwells deeply within us, and (God's) love becomes complete in us—perfect love!

This is how we know we're living steadily and deeply in (God), and (God) in us: (God's) given us life from his life, from his very own Spirit. Also, we've seen for ourselves and continue to state openly that the Father sent his Son as Savior of the world. Everyone who confesses that Jesus is God's Son participates continuously in an intimate relationship with God. We know it so well, we've embraced it heart and soul, this love that comes from God.

God is love. When we take up permanent residence in a life of love, we live in God and God lives in us. This way, love has the run of the house, becomes at home and mature in us, so that we're free of worry on Judgment Day—our standing in the world is identical with Christ's. There is no room in love for fear. Well-formed love banishes fear. Since fear is crippling, a fearful life—fear of death, fear of judgment—is one not yet fully formed in love.

We, though, are going to love—love and be loved. First we were loved, now we love. He loved us first. If anyone boasts, "I love God," and goes right on hating his brother or sister, thinking nothing of it, he is a liar. If he won't love the person he can see, how can he love the God he can't see? The command we have from Christ is blunt: Loving God includes loving people. You've got to love both.

Since I don't follow the lectionary like Takako, it was a challenge deciding on what to preach today. My son Aaron suggested the story of the Prodigal Son since this is somewhat of a homecoming. But my retirement hasn't included traveling to a distant land and squandering my wealth in profligate living.

Today is Super Bowl Sunday, so I thought about preaching a prophetic sermon contrasting the game is a symbol of America commercialism and consumerism, against our Christian values of denying oneself and serving others. But then, wouldn't I be hypocritical when I watched the commercials and enjoyed some nachos this evening?

Tuesday is Valentine's Day. So, I decided to preach about love even though V-Day is a mixed bag. For some it's a day of cards and flowers, chocolate and romantic meals. For others it's a day of heartache and loneliness, disappointment and regret. So, what's a preacher say?

I decided V-Day offers us an opportunity to evaluate how we're doing in the love department. I'm not talking about LUV, but rather the agape department - unconditional love – God's love.

V-Day didn't start with romance. In 496 CE Pope Gelasius started the feast of St. Valentine on February 14 to honor a church leader named Valentine of Terni. He became a bishop in 197 CE and was later martyred because of his faith.

One legend says Valentine was arrested and imprisoned for marrying Christian couples and aiding Christians who were being persecuted by Rome. Another legend says Valentine refused to sacrifice to pagan gods. He was imprisoned, but he shared his testimony with other prisoners and his prayers healed the jailer's daughter who suffered from blindness. On the day of his execution, he left her a note signed "Your Valentine". In still another legend Valentine was arrested for proselytizing and sent to the emperor Claudius. Claudius took a liking to him until Valentine tried to convince him to embrace Christianity. The emperor refused and condemned him to death. Valentine would not renounce his faith and was executed on February 14, 269 CE.

Our version of V-Day with romance, cards, flowers and candy is far removed from the kind of love that Valentine of Terni exhibited - the kind of love 1 John describes: "We love because God first loved us."

A few years ago, a national survey asked this question: "What words would you like most to hear spoken to you in genuine sincerity?" Stop and think about it for a moment. How would you answer the question? What words would you like to hear the most? Three answers topped the list. You can probably guess them. Number three was, "Supper is ready." Number two was, "I forgive you." And the number one answer was, yes, "I love you."

Now if saying "I love you" are three very important words, I wonder how often we say them? And to whom do we say them?

When was the last time you said those words to God? When was the last time you sincerely said, "God, I love you"? It seems so easy and maybe that's why we forget. Or maybe we've forgotten what it's like to love God. Or maybe we've never really been in love with God.

Loving God can mean different things. As 1 John says, "God is love, and those who abide in love, abide in God, and God abides in them." Loving God means you want to be with God. We always want to be with those we love. You want to be aware of God's presence and know that God is with you.

Loving God also means you want to be like God. Kids know this and imitate those they love. They put on mom or dad's shoes and dress in their clothes even though they're too big. Loving God means you share God's concerns and cares. You look at the world differently. You see everyone and everything through the lens of God's grace. Loving God also means that you want to give yourself to God. Love always involves a commitment. It's the root of all relationships including the divine. You trust God and want to commit yourself to God's ways.

Take some time today and tell God, “I love you”... I want to be aware of your presence... I want to be like you... I want to belong to you... I want to give you my best. Let God know how you feel and listen for God’s loving response.

After you say those three very important words to God, I want to encourage you to say them to someone in your life.

I’m not going to say who. Your heart knows who needs to hear these words. As 1 John says, “Beloved, since God loved us so much, we ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God, but if we love one another, God lives in us and God’s love is perfected in us.”

Dr. Gary Chapman wrote a book entitled “The Five Love Languages”. He says each of us speaks and hears the language of love in a particular way. If you know your language and the language of your loved ones then you can communicate with each other. If you don’t then you have a hard time hearing and being heard.

The five love languages are: 1) words, 2) time, 3) gifts, 4) acts of service, 5) physical touch.

- Some of us share and hear love best verbally. Our love language is words that are spoken and written.
- Others of us communicate best with time. Our love language is spending time with the person we care about.
- Others of us share and hear love by giving and receiving gifts. Our love language is tangible, the gift doesn’t have to be expensive, just something we or the other person appreciates.
- Others of us communicate best with helping. Our love language is offering simple acts of service to someone in need or having somebody else give us a hand.
- Last but not least, some of us share and hear love best physically. I’m not just talking about sexual intimacy. This love language involves sitting close, holding hands, hugging, and other forms of physical expression.

I encourage you to determine your preferred love language. Talk about it with a family member or close friend. You may be surprised by what you learn. You may also discover the appropriate language of love to use for your beloved.

Remember there’s someone out there who needs to hear you say “I love you”. She, he or they need transforming and heart- warming words. She, he or they need the touch of affirmation and acceptance. She, he or they need an expression of care and concern. You are the only person who can give that message. So, tell that person, “I love you.”

After you say these three very important words to God and someone in your life, I want you to say them to the people of Jemez Valley.

It’s not enough to love God and the people in our life. We are called to love our neighbors and our enemies. As 1 John says, “Those who do not love a brother or sister who they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen... the commandment we have from God is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters.”

I believe this church does a pretty good job of loving the people of this valley, but there's always room for improvement. When I think back over our almost 20 years together, I'm amazed at all the different ways we expressed God's love.

Long before I arrived, we were sharing God's love through AA and NA. Mike and others before him provide a loving life-line to people drowning in addiction. In 2002, three months after I arrived, we changed our Sunday morning schedule and started a Sunday school for children, youth, and adults to share and teach people about God's love. In the summer of 2003, we left our building and started worshipping outdoors for the first time to experience God's love in and with Creation. In 2006, we started our monthly food pantry to share God's love by feeding our hungry sisters and brothers in the valley.

In 2010 and 2011, we partnered with the Jemez Fine Art Gallery and shared God's love through Faith and Art Shows about Christ's seven last words, plus resurrection and rebirth. In 2012, we started sharing God's love by providing much needed counseling services, first with Courtney and now Sally. In 2015, after going through the New Beginnings process, we decided to share God's love through an after-school program that lasted for 2 years. In 2017 and 2018, you and the people of this valley shared God's love with me and my family through a myriad of ways and your loving prayers helped heal me.

In 2019, we shared God's love by creating this "prayground" for kids in the sanctuary. I can't imagine this sacred space without it, can you? In 2019 we hired a youth director and started the Jemez Mountain Youth Group. Even though the group didn't survive the pandemic, young people in this valley who didn't come to church experienced God's love. Last but not least, in 2020, we started sharing God's love online by worshipping with Zoom and posting recordings on YouTube, which continues today.

This doesn't include all the weddings, funerals, memorials, fundraisers and community events that were lovingly hosted in this facility. Nor does it include all the money collected for special offerings for people in need here and around the world.

When I look back, I'm amazed at all the ways we shared God's love with the people around us. When I look ahead, I wonder what new and different ways you and Takako will say "I love you" to the people of this valley.

Several few years ago, an artist from Santa Fe painted a picture of our bell tower during an arts festival in the park. As you can see, the colors are pink, red and white like a valentine. When she was asked why she used those colors, the artist said that she felt love radiating from the church. Yet she had never even been inside the building or met anyone from our congregation.

Beloved, we all know there's something special about this church. That's why we're here. We experience God's love and are called to share it. Let's not forget our three very important words. Say them with me, "I love you." Say them to God. Say them to someone in your life. Say them to the people of this valley. And know that I love you now and always! Halleluiah! Amen!