

December 20, 2020

"Love: Nothing But Good"

John Wesley United Methodist Church

1 John 4:7-12

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As I started to do my research for today's Advent sermon on love, I came across St. Augustine's sermon on love which he wrote somewhere around the turn of the fourth century. Augustine lived from the year 354 to 430 and was unquestionably the most important theologian in the first millennium of the western church. He shaped thinking on the church, baptism, sin, salvation, the Trinity, the Christian state of being, sex – in short, on almost everything. After reading his sermon, I thought – I have to share some edited portions of this with you. So sit back and let's listen to these consequential words of Augustine.

“... All who do not love God are strangers and, perhaps even antichrists. They might come to the church, but they cannot be numbered among the children of God. That fountain of life does not belong to them. A person can have a baptism. A person can be called a Christian. A person can receive the sacrament of the body and blood of the Lord. But, remember, it is said, ‘All who eat and drink unworthily, bring judgment on themselves.’ To have all these sacraments is, I say, possible even for a bad person. But to have love and be a bad person, is impossible. Impossible. Love is a unique gift, the fountain that is yours alone. The Holy Spirit of God exhorts you to drink from it, and in so doing you drink from God himself.”

“... The scripture reads, ‘Beloved, let us love one another because love is from God.’ The reason why St. John exhorts us so, is that we may come to know the love of God. Though, at first, we may be slow to love, let us not be slow to realize the origins of love. Because He first loved us! God sent his only Son into the world, that we may live through him. He loved the sinner and then he took away their sins. He loved the blind, and then gave them sight. He loved the sick, and he visited them to make them whole. Love, then, is God. And our Lord himself said: ‘No one can have greater love than this: but to lay his down his life for his friends.’ How, then, is the Father’s love for us proved? By the fact that he sent his only Son to die for us”

“... No one has ever seen God. He is invisible, and must be looked for not with the eye but with the heart. For hear the Gospel: ‘Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.’ So do not imagine God according to the desire of your eyes. If you do, you will picture for yourself a huge form which extends in every which direction. Your imagination will let it fill realm after realm of space, all the vastness you can conceive of. Or, maybe you picture for yourself a venerable-looking old man. Do not

imagine either of these things. If you would see God, here is what you should imagine: God is love. What sort of face does love have? What shape is it? What size? What hands and feet does it have? No one can say. And yet it does have feet. Those feet that carry people to church. It does have hands, those hands that reach out to the poor. It has eyes, those through which we consider the needy. And it has ears, of which the Lord tells us, ‘He that has ears to hear, let him listen.’”

“... So why now, brothers and sisters, are you calling out “Amen!” to these, my words of love? What have I told you? Have I been talking about something made from gold and silver? Have I dug out jewels from hidden treasure? Have I shown anything like this to your eyes? Yet I speak of love, and it pleases you. Certainly you do not see anything. But as it pleases you to praise love, so let it please you to keep that love in your heart. Pay attention to what I say brothers and sisters. I urge you on, as God enables me, towards a great treasure. If you were shown a priceless, beautiful vase, inlaid with gold, and it charmed your eyes and drew the eager desire of your heart, would you not say, ‘If only I had that vase!’ But it would be pointless for you to say it, since, because of its value, it would not be in your power to possess it – although someone who wants to have it might think of stealing it from another’s house. But love, if it pleases you, is there for the taking! So take it, have it, possess it. There is no need to rob anyone, no need to buy it. It is free. Take it, clasp it. There is nothing sweeter. If this is what it is like merely to talk about it, what must it be like when one has it?”

“... So, brothers and sisters, this is what I insist upon: that all your human interactions must be rooted in love. All that you do must proceed from the root of love. Remember, life has its troubles, but even a rose has thorns. Yet all we do must be motivated by love. So once and for all, I give you this one short command: ‘Love, and do what you will.’ If you must hold your peace, hold your peace out of love. If you must cry out, cry out in love. If you must correct someone, correct them out of love. If you spare them, spare them out of love. Let the root of love be in you: for nothing, no nothing, can spring from love, but good.”

Nothing can spring from love but good! These are beautiful words from St. Augustine. Because just imagine what our world could look like if humanity would only grasp the magnitude of God's divine love for us. Imagine the goodness that would result. Yet for some reason we fail to fully understand God's love. We continue to blame all the ills of the world on God, as if it were his fault, as if we have been working to correct them. We continue to blame God for being absent in our lives when we

ourselves are rarely present in his. And so on this Advent Sunday of love, perhaps it would do us good to be reminded of just how much God does love us and how often we take that love for granted. First of all, God wanted us. He didn't need to create humanity, but God wanted a people to love and be in relationship with. And so he created this beautiful earth for us, he made us in his own image, he gave us everything we could ever need, he gave us free will to make our own choices in this life...and, he called us his children. What could be better than those gifts? You see, that's what love does. Love gives the very best one has to offer to another. And when God looked out on all his handiwork, all that he gave us, he saw that it was "good, very good." But what happened? His children rebelled against him. And as a result, we became a fallen and broken people. In Genesis, it says, "The Lord saw that the wickedness of humankind was great on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart." His children "grieved him to his heart." I'm sure many of us can relate to that in one way or another. Then, in the Book of Jeremiah, God speaks to the Israelites asking, "What did your ancestors find so wrong with me that led them to stray so far from me?" Can you feel the hurt in God's question? "What is so wrong with me that people turn away?" And in the last book of the Old Testament, Malachi, God again speaks to his people, his children, and says, "I have loved you always." To which humankind challenges God, "How have you loved us?" As a theologian once wrote, "God's love for us has always been a burden to him because of our rebellion, our hardness of heart, and our ingratitude. Because when we really reflect on the sacred story, God's love for us seems to have given him nothing but sorrow and grief. Grief over the human condition. Grief over our disbelief. Grief over the rebellion of his children. Grief over the hardness of people's hearts. Until finally this grief is all gathered up, as it must have been, in his weeping at the site of the cross. And yet, hanging before all his children who hung him on the cross, God responds by saying, "Forgive them for they know not what they do." God, once again, not giving up on us, but saying "I love you, and I have always loved you."

Rev. Page Kelly tells the story of a visit he once made to the home of a middle-age couple. When he entered the house, his senses were immediately overcome by the pleasant aroma of food. Seated in the combination living and dining room, he could see as the wife prepared a veritable banquet of food. The table was filled with a variety of dishes. "You must be expecting a lot of company," he said. "No," the woman quietly replied, "just our son." "Oh. Where does he live?" There was an awkward silence before the woman said, "Pastor, our son has been in prison for the past seven years. He's coming home today, so I've cooked him all his favorite dishes." You see, this woman understood that the burden of love can sometimes be a very heavy burden indeed. Because she had carried this burden of love for a

son, a son who had gone astray for a long time.¹ And if we can feel the enormity of this mother's love for her son who is finally coming home, we might get a small understanding of God's love for us.

Yes, Lord God, Lord Jesus, how you have loved us! How you have loved us! You, who own all the riches and splendor of heaven, chose instead to be born to a poor, young, ordinary couple, out in a cave on the hillside? You who so masterfully created and crafted the universe, suddenly have to earn a meager living as a carpenter? You who are the Bread of Life, and the rest for the weary, come to feel hunger and exhaustion? You, whose whole nature is love and grace and peace, willingly come to be hated, betrayed and killed? You who are perfect and knew no sin, chose to take upon yourself the sins of all humanity? Yes, that is the greatness of your love for each and every one of us.

So this Christmas, let us be aware and be thankful for God's great love that is given to you and me in so many ways. Then, as we are filled with this overwhelming and overflowing love from God, we can respond with love – in all our human interactions, in our relationships, in our work, in our decisions, in our attitudes. Because, as Augustine said, nothing, no nothing, can spring from this love but good. Amen!

¹ The Burden of Love, Page H. Kelly