

1 John 4:7-21

4:7 Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God.

4:8 Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love.

4:9 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.

4:10 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.

4:11 Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another.

4:12 No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.

4:13 By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit.

4:14 And we have seen and do testify that the Father has sent his Son as the Savior of the world.

4:15 God abides in those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God, and they abide in God.

4:16 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.

4:17 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.

4:18 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.

4:19 We love because he first loved us.

4:20 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.

4:21 The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.

When we abide in God's love, we bear fruit of obedience.

John 15:1-8

15:1 "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower.

15:2 He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit.

15:3 You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you.

15:4 Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me.

15:5 I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit,

because apart from me you can do nothing.

15:6 Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned.

15:7 If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.

15:8 My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.

Proclamation of the Word

Perfect love casts out fear. John writes. *Perfect love casts out fear.*

I wonder then if perfect fear casts out love...

We live in an age of fear. So maybe that is why open-hearted, generous love seems to be on short supply some days.

Fear has its purpose. Fear has saved our species over thousands of years. Our brains are wired for fear to keep us safe from danger. But overwhelming and irrational fear can do terrible things to us.

I listened to a podcast this week about the rise of anxiety in teens.¹ I have a special place in my heart for youth, but also teenagers tend to be a thermometer of how well we are as a larger society. And teens are wrecked by anxiety. The rise in anxiety for all ages has increased, and we are not well. This growing issue is more than just folks brains are wired for anxiety disorders. Those who study these things tell us anxiety, in particular panic attacks, are skyrocketing. Counselors at Clemson University will tell you they are overwhelmed by students needing help. Teachers who have worked with young people for 20-30 years see an increase. Now there are lots of causes and correlations. Most adults assume it is the larger issues in our culture- rumors of war, climate change, for instance. But when teenagers were interviewed, it has more to do with friends, academic pressures, bullying, social media, and not knowing how to handle these things. That's the bad news.

Hear the good news from 1 John, let them soak into your heart...

4:18 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.

4:19 We love because he first loved us.

I have to wonder if part of our brokenness in society is that we have forgotten this truth. God is love. God shows us love in Jesus the Christ who gave himself willingly. His life is the pattern of love. If we know and trust this God, we are compelled to love one another in the same way. And sometimes it happens the other way. People who follow Jesus show us God's love, helping us see and know in our hearts how much God loves us. In the gospel of John the image of Jesus as the vine and us as the

branches reminds us that we are all connected, belonging to Christ. We cannot love God without being in community.

So I wonder if a remedy to fear is to be drawn again into the love of God and the community of faith. We can all be in a place of fear and anxiety at times. God's love and our community of faith can be part of our healing. The church can help heal the world.

Let's look at the Scripture, John is writing to a church where there has been conflict between groups- those who left and those who stayed. They are stuck in that conflict- separated now by their fear and differences.

Scott Hoezee writes,

John yokes this fear that has no place in perfect love specifically with a fear “of punishment,” which may be an indication that what he is talking about is the fear of still being punished for our sins. Those of us who are pastors have... heard this fear expressed by those who are ending their earthly journey. “How can I be sure I did enough for God to love me? What if God plays all the sins of my life on some giant screen for all to see? How will I ever live down the humiliation? How do I know there is grace sufficient for even me?”

Whatever the precise scenario, it happens too often even in the [Larger] Church [and world] that one group attacks another viciously, unkindly... These days the ability to be cruel toward one another has been enhanced by the ability to leave face-less comments on blog posts, Facebook conversations, Twitter feeds. People who might not be unkind were they actually talking to another person find it much easier to lob accusations and epithets in print, including very often about people they've never met. But that does not prevent many folks today—and we all fall into this to one degree or another now and then—from accusing people of things that, if they really knew the other person as a friend or even as an acquaintance, they would soon discover are just not true....

There are many explanations for this rise in such uncivil behavior toward one another but nine times out of ten if you traced it back to its core cause, you would find some version or another of fear. Fear of losing. Fear of the stranger. Fear of having the Bible disproven. Fear that if this or that turns out to be true, our whole faith edifice might collapse like the proverbial house of cards. And most of those fears, in turn, can be traced back to the fear that maybe our great God doesn't have the whole world in his hands after all. Maybe he is not the loving and gracious God the church says he is. Maybe . . . maybe my status with this God hangs by a thread and so how can I ever be sure if I am really saved? [if I am really loved? So it follows...]

The less sure you are about God's unconditional love toward you, the greater you fear. And the greater you fear, the more likely it is you will find it hard to treat other people with the love of Christ because so much of life will feel threatening to you in the end.ⁱⁱ

We need God. God is the one who first loves us, the most real love we can find.

William Sloane Coffin said "God's love doesn't seek value, it creates it. It is not because we have value that we are loved, but because we are loved that we have value."

Do you believe that? This letter is addressed to the BELOVED- addressed twice the "Agaped." To be agaped is to be cherished, precious, beloved.

Who are you? Beloved. Who am I? Beloved. Who are we? Beloved

You are beloved beyond imagination by a God who came to earth to seek us out. He shows us the ways of love in the life of Jesus...to touch the leper clean, to heal the sick by word and deed, to stand up for what is just, to shine light in the darkness.

When we rest secure in our beloved-ness, we cannot help but love our brothers and sisters.

So I think we need a love revolution to be well- not the general kind, but one rooted in the deep love of God and specifically shaped by the love of Jesus. Those who have been transformed by the Love of God are sent into the world to love.

So what if 750 disciples of Fort Hill Church worked to shape a community that looks like Jesus' vision of the Kingdom of God, where poverty is destroyed, where people practice justice, kindness, and humility, where the love of neighbor and strangers is practiced? Love is a verb. It is an action more than a feeling.

So what does that look like? Some of you are involved and serving in Ripple of One, which we heard about yesterday at Presbyterian Women lunch. But all of us are involved through our financial giving. Ripple of One is one of our benevolence missions which helps people change their lives by providing the support of loving community and accountability. That is what happens when disciples see a need, care, and create a community of people working towards a common goal.

This week we learned about *World Changing 101* with Dave Lamotte. In the end we were asked to consider something for which we care, then to engage with others who care for the same thing. Together we can take steps to address a need through the everyday, mundane work of service in love. We each pick one thing to do.

Here is an example of a small movement that is making a difference and sharing God's love. I recently learned about a service at a local coin laundry in Greenville. The poorest members of the community

can come do laundry for free.ⁱⁱⁱ A family who is living in a camper, an elderly man, and a homeless man or woman come on Wednesday night from 6:00-8:00. The socks, underwear, and clean clothes mean more than clean laundry. At the local coin laundry, relationships are formed. Those who come seeking clean clothes are also clothed in dignity, friendship, and love. Those who are unseen come out into the light and are beloved in a very concrete way. You might wonder why and how this came to be.

Adahlia "Adah" and her husband Justin are twenty-one. She works in a downtown Greenville law firm. They are changing lives and building community. Adah has a place in her heart for people without a home as her own mother was homeless at age 17. A couple of years ago she was working in a thrift store and began to notice a woman named Frankie who came each week to buy a new set of clothing. Frankie would throw away her clothes and put on clean ones. Adah learned that Frankie was without a home and could not afford to wash her clothes. So she offered to take her clothes home and wash them for her so she could have a couple of outfits. She would leave the clean clothes "For Frankie." Today the Wednesday laundry service is called "For Frankie- making friends one wash at a time." At first, Adah started a *Gofundme* page to raise \$1000 to buy detergent, bleach, and provide quarters for the machines. Then a movement began with more people getting involved. A local non-profit is working with now to set up a 501c3. More community people are getting involved. Relationships are formed. Stigma and prejudices are being healed.

In *Worldchanging 101* with David Lamotte, we begin with something we care deeply about, and we develop a plan for how to respond with others who care about the same thing. And before you know it a small movement begins. Most transformation happens with the mundane, everyday work to help make the world better.

World changers know God's perfect love. They are filled with that perfect love and all the security and joy that go with it. There is no room for fear in a heart filled to the brim with such joyful trust. And from the overflow of that divinely inspired joy there will come rivers of kindness, charity, and love toward our sisters and brothers, too.

We love because God first loved us. God's love changes the world. So pick one thing.

- Care: Who do you care about? the infirmed, animals, children with reading challenges, the earth, education, a needy family member, college ministry?
- Contribute: So what can you contribute? what skills and gifts do you have?
- Connect: And who can do that work with you?
- Commit: What step will you take that allows God's perfect love to flow through you and to bear fruit?

In the face of all the bad news in the world, those of us living in the Vine, abiding in Jesus, bear good fruit-- doing good deeds in obedient love. Though our callings may be different, we do so as branches rooted in that Vine, together, not separate.

God gathers us here to be nourished. And God sends us out renewed in faith and service.

ⁱ *On Point*, "Teen Anxiety on the Rise" October 19, 2017. www.wbur.org/onpoint/2017/10/19/teen-anxiety-on-the-rise

ⁱⁱ Hoezee, Scott, *Easter 5B Epistle Lectionary*, at Centers for Excellence in Preaching. Thanks to Scott Hoezee who conveyed my thoughts and said them better than I can.

ⁱⁱⁱ Pietras, Emily, "'For Frankie' Project to Provide Laundry Service to Those in Need," *Greenville News*, July 19, 2017. www.greenvillejournal.com/2017/07/19/frankie-project-provide-free-laundry-service-need/