

“A Mission of Love”
1 John 4:7-12
October 4, 2015

INTRODUCTION:

Our focus this fall is on our church’s vision, mission and core values, which our leadership has been using as part of our five year strategic plan. We considered our vision statement last week, which answers the question of the desirable future of our church that only God can accomplish. We said that we want him to make of us a “community of the coming kingdom bringing hope to a broken world.” We want to move today to our mission statement, which describes what we believe God wants us to do. This mission is all about love, “Loving God and loving others as we are transformed by God’s love.” As you can see, there are three parts to this mission statement. The first two, to love God and others, are what Jesus identified as the greatest and second greatest of all the commandments.

The third part of our mission describes how we are going to do that. It is not an easy thing to love anyone other than ourselves. Because of our sinful nature, we are all self-centered. Just two weeks ago, I was on a group bicycle ride one Saturday that we call a “no-drop” ride. That means that we wait at every turn for the slowest rider to catch up. On this particular ride a couple of weeks ago, we had a slower rider. And since you don’t want the slowest rider to feel too bad, one rider will sometimes drop back and stay with that person. As I was riding that day, I detected within my heart two parts of my self-centered, unloving nature. On the one hand, the competitive part of me wanted to stay with the fastest group. Why? So they would think well of me. Then I thought, but someone needs to go back with this slowest rider, so I decided to do so. As I slowed my pace, another thought immediately came to mind. “I hope others notice how kind and generous I am in doing this.” Even in doing something kind and generous, I was filled with self-centeredness. It clings to us even in what others might think of as our best moments.

So how do we learn to love? We do so only through an encounter with the original lover, with God. His love transforms us into lovers. That’s what this section of John’s epistle is about. It divides itself easily into three sections.

I. God Is Love – v. 7-8

I notice that John makes this famous statement, “God is love,” in support of his command for us to love one another. This is a command John keeps circling back to. He wants us to love one another because he sees love as being the central distinguishing feature of someone who knows God. **“Whoever loves**

has been born of God and knows God” (v. 7). Just like some families share a certain trait across all members of the family, perhaps a certain physical or personality characteristic, so those born of God, and only those born of God, possess his central trait of love.

So John takes us back to the most fundamental expression of love in the universe, the love of God. When he says, **“God is love,”** he doesn’t just mean that God does loving things, but that God in his essence is love. His love shines through in all he does. I recently finished reading George Marsden’s excellent biography of Jonathan Edwards, and Marsden points out how Edwards based his understanding of the love of God within the Trinitarian nature of God. God has existed for all eternity as one God in three persons. Each of the three persons of the Trinity expresses this love to the other two members of the Trinity. Think about it. If God were just one person, love really couldn’t be part of his essence for all eternity for the simple reason that there was no other person to be the object of his love. But God is not unipersonal. In his essence, he is relational, and each person of Trinity pours himself out for the other two. No member of the Trinity has ever said or thought, “But what about me? What about my needs?” Instead, each of them thinks and plans completely for the glory and happiness of the other two.

John wrote about this throughout his Gospel. He opens by describing Jesus as existing **“in the bosom of the Father”** (1:18), a phrase indicating love and intimacy. Then John reports Jesus as saying that the Spirit’s ministry is to glorify Jesus (16:14). The Son glorifies the Father (17:4) and the Father glorifies the Son (17:5). Tim Keller has a chapter on this in his book *The Reason for God*. He writes, “Each of the divine persons centers upon the others. None demands that the others revolve around him. Each voluntarily circles the other two, pouring love, delight, and adoration into them. Each person of the Trinity loves, adores, defers to, and rejoices in the others. That creates a dynamic, pulsating dance of joy and love. The early leaders of the Greek church had a word for this—*perichoresis*... It means literally to ‘dance or flow around.’”

Jonathan Edwards says that it is this dance that explains the infinite and eternal happiness of God. He is happy because he is perfectly relational, with each member centered not on himself but on the other two. Here is how Marsden summarizes Edwards’ insights.

Why would such an infinitely good, perfect, and eternal being create?... Here Edwards drew on the Christian Trinitarian conception of God as essentially interpersonal... The ultimate reason that God creates, said Edwards, is not to remedy some lack in God, but to extend that perfect internal communication of the triune God’s goodness and love.... God’s joy and happiness and delight in divine perfections is expressed externally by communicating that happiness and delight to created beings.

Someone might object at this point by asking, “But isn’t God being self-centered when he commands us to live for his glory?” The answer is that he is acting in love for us when he tells us to do that, because he knows that the only way for us to have true and lasting joy is to center our lives on him. He is inviting us into the dance, centering his life on us even as we are invited to center ours on him.

We have seen, then, that the essence of God is relational love, expressed in his Trinitarian existence for all eternity. His command to us to love one another is based on this foundation. Let me mention an application before moving to our next point. The core meaning of life is to love God and others. Our church mission statement isn’t merely one thing Christians are being asked to do among a number of different things. As beings created in the image of God, love lies at the heart of who we were created to be. That is contrary to what our culture tells us. Who does our culture hold up as its celebrities? We admire the successful. There’s a reason *Forbes* magazine spends a lot of time and money putting together the list of America’s wealthiest, and no time at all on putting together the list of America’s poorest. Our culture admires the financially successful. We also admire those who are attractive, accomplished, or just famous. How many religious inspirational talks have you heard from some sports celebrity that is at best very thin on any biblical content, and whose only reason for being put in front of such a big audience is his accomplishments in the sporting arena? Heaven’s celebrities are not the successful, the attractive, the accomplished and the famous, but those who love as they center their lives on God and others.

II. God Has Shown His Love in Christ – v. 9-11

If the essence of life is love, then we have a big problem. If you are like me, and I know you are, then your natural condition is to be self-centered, not other-centered. Instead of moving around others in this glorious, heavenly dance, we are stationary, wanting others to move around us. This self-centeredness is so strong that there is only one force in the universe powerful enough to deliver us from our stationary place and get us dancing. John begins talking about that in verse 9, when he explains that God’s love is not just talked about, but shown. **“In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him.”** And then he gets more specific by saying that Jesus was sent to be the “propitiation” for our sins.

If we are to understand the love of God and be transformed by it, we must understand the meaning of this important word. Propitiation refers to the satisfaction of God’s wrath through blood sacrifice. By it, the wrath of God is

turned away by the blood of Jesus. The idea of God's wrath being turned away through blood sacrifice is all through the Bible. The Old Testament sacrifices showed this thousands, if not millions of times through the history of the Old Testament. The Passover Lamb showed it, as it was only the blood of the lamb that kept the avenging angel from killing the firstborn of the household. Then the New Testament identifies Jesus as the fulfillment of that lamb.

If we are to appreciate the full impact of this word, we must understand that the wrath of God is personal, not mechanical. It is not the case that sin simply has bad consequences, and that these consequences can be referred to as the wrath of God. Sin evokes in God a reaction that is personal and that produces a relational disruption. If I know that Wendy is angry at me, it is very unpleasant, and I want it to end as soon as possible. But imagine that someone very powerful is angry at you because you were unkind to his daughter, who is a fellow student at the college you attend. Perhaps her father is a powerful dictator from another country, but one who has many of his agents in our own country. Then you receive an anonymous and ominous email that says your days will be short because this dictator has ordered your murder. Our situation before God is that his wrath is both personal and completely justified.

The Bible is clear, both here and throughout its pages, that God is by nature merciful. Since there is nothing we can do to satisfy his wrath, God takes action himself to do so. He sends his own Son to satisfy his holy wrath. The horrors and the glories of this are almost unimaginable. The source of all Jesus' happiness for eternity past was the perfect love within the Trinity. That is now removed from him, and in its place there is only the Father turning his face away from the Son, a horror both for the Father and the Son. But the glories for us are breathtaking. Since it is God himself who presents this offering to take away wrath, we can have complete confidence that it will actually do so. This is not our idea of something that will satisfy divine wrath, but God's provision. The result is that we are now invited into this dance of the godhead. God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit have boldly and passionately given up everything that we might be included in this Trinitarian fellowship. And what is God's motive? He is moved by love, John tells us. He didn't do this because of what he got out of it. What did Jesus get for himself by being the propitiation for our sins? He got nothing for himself. Remember that he already had a community of perfect love and joy within the Trinity. He didn't need us at all. He didn't do it for himself, but for us, and that's the nature of love. God calls us to this same love, and that brings us to our next point.

III. God Continues to Show His Love through Us – v. 12

John writes that no one has ever seen God. So how are people to know of his love if we can't see him? What is John's answer? **"If we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us"** (v. 12). They will know of the love of God by the quality of our love for another. Ours is the great privilege of showing the world the love of God.

Let's consider a couple of applications of this. One application is to resist the lure of isolation. You were created for loving community because you bear the image of God. Isolation is dehumanizing. People sometimes find themselves in isolation because of the pain that is involved in relationships. The truth is that because of the sinful human nature possessed by us all, relationships in this life will always involve some pain. C. S. Lewis has pointed out that the only place besides heaven that is free from the pain and suffering of relationships is hell. There is no relational pain in heaven because our sin will be a thing of the past and we will be in the middle of the heavenly dance, centering our lives on God and others. There will be no relational pain in hell because there will be no relationships. Those who choose to remain self-centered will be allowed to do so, but will find it a small world consistently only of themselves.

A word of comfort for those who are lonely may be helpful here. Some are lonely because of their stubbornness in holding on to self-centeredness, while others are lonely because of circumstances outside of their control. If the former, there is hope for that in repentance and faith. Jesus invites you to turn away from self-centered love and join the dance as you trust him. If you are lonely because of circumstances related to things like illness or old age, there is comfort for you, too. Loneliness is real and significant suffering, but it is temporary. It is only a blip compared to the deep relational joys that await God's children.

One more application is necessary. If the heart of love is death, then Jesus calls us to come and die through loving. When you love, you give up options by committing yourself to other people. Committed relationships limit you. You can't keep your options open and love at the same time.

CONCLUSION:

So this is our mission. We are called by God to show his love by our love for him and for others. We are called to die, because loving requires dying. But the rest of that story is that God can raise the dead. As he calls us to focus on others and not ourselves, he says that he will be focused on us. So if you want to be happy, join God in dying through self-giving love. The God who raises the dead will give you his fullness and life. And he will bring about the vision statement we looked at last week, to become a community of the coming kingdom, bring hope to a broken world.