**Daily Devotions**

**July 2024**

*01*

“Whoever says, ‘I am in the light’, while hating a brother or sister, is still in the darkness.”

— 1 John 2:9

Hate can be active or passive. It can mean being openly hostile to someone or something, or just having strong feelings of aversion to them. Just because we aren’t demonstrating our hatred through physical, emotional, or verbal violence doesn’t mean we’re somehow exempt from holding people in contempt. That goes for someone who intensely dislikes another person because of their political views, religious beliefs, gender identity, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, socioeconomic state, or absolutely any reason whatsoever. If we are completely honest with ourselves, we will see that there are people or groups that raise antipathy in us, and that we justify our feelings by painting them as “wrong”. But what I read in 1 John here is that this just doesn’t fly. We cannot say that we are followers of Jesus and still harbor these secret (or not-so-secret) hatreds for our siblings (which means everyone, not just the people we like or who agree with us).

Can anyone, then, claim to be “in the light?” Honestly, I would say “no.” All I can claim is that I am groping toward the light with the help of a God who loves me as I am, forgives me where I fall short, and cheers me on in my efforts to be and do better. I do not beat myself up when I am confronted with my unconscious biases or open complicity in injustice. But I do ask God to help me discern appropriate action and take necessary steps to change. God calls us into the light—God’s light, in Christ Jesus—and is leading and guiding us toward it, and is also leading and guiding every single one of our siblings toward it, too.

If I am completely honest with myself, who do I find that I secretly hate?

*02*

“For all that is in the world—the desire of the flesh, the desire of the eyes, the pride in riches—comes not from the Father but from the world.”

— 1 John 2:16

There is the world, and then there is the world. I draw a distinction between the world that God created out of God’s infinite beauty and love and “the world” which denotes the trappings of human society that fly in the face of God’s beautiful creation, including us—the beloved children made in God’s own image. I do this because it can be too easy to look at any natural thing and condemn it as the antithesis of things spiritual, which isn’t the case. Our embodiedness, for example, comes with physical needs including food, sex, and even altered states of consciousness. These in and of themselves are not an affront to God or a bar to spirituality. “Desire” in this case, is normal and healthy.

Where things get out of whack is when our human social order places far too much emphasis on the satisfaction of these desires as the end goal of life, rather than as a means of being whole and healthy. In the U.S., for example, there is a ridiculous emphasis on accumulating wealth far beyond what is needed for a full and satisfying life, on having a perfect body, on constant social validation through various media, and on this bizarre contradiction of hypersexualization and prudishness. These things do not come from God. We have created them, and perpetuate them by our willing participation in the narratives presented.

The writer of 1 John is calling us into awareness of those things that are clearly not from God, so that we can reject them and focus on the things that are from God which, I would strongly propose, includes the natural desires of our embodied flesh.

Where do I find myself sucked into the social norms of my culture even when they are counter to the way of Jesus?

*03*

“The children of God and the children of the devil are revealed in this way: all who do not do what is right are not from God, nor are those who do not love their brothers and sisters.”

— 1 John 3:10

But what is “right”? There are plenty of people and groups and institutions out there trying to convince us that their particular idea of rightness is the one God would endorse. They interpret ancient scripture written for a particular context as fully applying to our modern paradigm and try to enforce behavior that oppresses women, for example, or justifies slavery, or condemns homosexuality, or all manner of other social injustices. They can (and do) decide that anyone who doesn’t follow their particular interpretation of “right” is a child of the devil, as the writer of 1 John puts it. And that’s kind of scary. But the second half of this verse offers a balance to the first: bottom line is that we have to love our brothers and sisters, our “siblings” and that, my friends, is every single human being, as every single human being is created by God in God’s own image and loved unconditionally. So if your definition of “right” causes you to withhold love (love is active, not just a passive feeling) from your siblings, then your definition is wrong.

What is “right?” Loving your neighbor as yourself. Full stop.

How do I determine what is right and wrong on a day to day basis?

*04*

“For this is the message you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another. We must not be like Cain who was from the evil one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his own deeds were evil and his brother’s righteous.”

— 1 John 3:11-12

Poor Cain. I mean, it totally was not okay that he murdered his brother. But this idea that he did so because his own deeds were evil… um, the dude just farmed grain instead of meat and, for whatever reason, God preferred the meat. Of course the story of Cain and Abel is ahistorical—a folktale to explain the entry of evil into the world. But had it actually happened… well, I really don’t think God plays favorites. So clearly the idea that “God likes you better than me, Abel!” was all in Cain’s head. It arose from petty jealousy. Somehow, Cain wasn’t getting what he wanted out of life and he blamed his brother for being “the good one” and acted out his unhappiness with violence.

And how does this apply to us? I think the vast majority of people blame their unhappiness on external circumstances—my boss doesn’t like me, I’m not good-looking enough, my partner isn’t supportive, society is messed up, what-have-you. The world is against me. God is against me. And when we nurse these resentments, we can be pushed to retaliate. Of course, most of us won’t murder someone like Cain did. But Jesus said that anyone who is angry at his brother is as liable to judgment as a murderer. (Matthew 5:21-22) So as the writer of 1 John points out, we need to love one another—active, service-giving, sacrificial love—instead of resenting one another. That doesn’t mean we put up with unacceptable behavior (sometimes the most loving thing we can do is to and an unhealthy relationship, business or personal). But it does mean we stop blaming others for our unhappiness and ask God to help us take action to change ourselves.

When and how do I let resentment toward others affect my sense of well-being?

*05*

“Do not be astonished, brothers and sisters, that the world hates you.”

— 1 John 3:13

“The world” here is the same as I talked about on Tuesday (1 John 2:16). It’s not just that people who disagree with your decision to follow in the Way of Jesus—that is, the way of crossing boundaries to act in unconditional love to others and work for justice for the oppressed—are resentful of your efforts to change systems on behalf of those who are poor. (And it’s certainly not that people who disagree with your interpretation of the Bible refuse to stop being gay or having premarital sex, if that’s what you think it means.) The world is the entire social order built on selling lies about how to be happy or successful (by buying things or chasing down temporary “highs” through money, food, drugs, sex, etc.). The world is about the endless pursuit of wealth at the expense of humanity. This world absolutely hates anyone who is courageous enough to say “No” to the lies and say “Yes” to a life of simplicity, justice, peace, and above all, love. When we choose to step outside of the endless materialism narrative of western capitalism, those who can no longer claim power over us will hate us. We ought not be astonished at this. But neither should we fear it. Jesus is the one who destroys the walls of our societal prison and beckons us out into true freedom. Jesus holds our hand as we step through, and has our back when we experience opposition, even from within ourselves.

The “real world” is the one God created—beautiful and perfect, but sometimes a challenge to live in because of all the distractions and powerful societal messages that tell us it can’t be done.

What does it mean to me that “the world hates you”?

*06*

“All who hate a brother or sister are murderers, and you know that murderers do not have eternal life abiding in them.”

— 1 John 3:15

Murder: to kill (a person) unlawfully and unjustifiably with premeditated malice. (Merriam Webster) Is hatred really as bad as murder? Is anger (Matt 5:21-22)? It seems a stretch. By this definition, murder certainly involves hatred (premeditated malice), but seems to be a step further down the way. Aren’t there plenty of people who nurse hatred in their hearts but never actually end someone’s life?

Yet 1 John is clear that anything less than love for a sibling (i.e. another human being) is entirely unacceptable to the point of losing eternal life. It’s a tall order. Frankly, I wonder if many people can say they are entirely without hatred. Are we all at risk of God’s ultimate promise because we fall prey to our anger and frustration with others? I have a hard time believing that even murderers “do not have eternal life abiding in them.” As I understand it, salvation and eternal life are gifts freely given, whether or not we have earned them by whatever standard one might come up with.

That being said, when we truly hate someone, don’t we wish they didn’t exist? Wouldn’t we prefer it if they were dead and gone so we don’t have to think about them anymore? Aren’t we, in some small way, committing murder in our hearts even if we don’t act on it literally? And ultimately, that kind of hatred also murders the hater—it poisons the mind and heart and makes peace impossible. The only antidote for that poison is love—the love that is an action, rather than a feeling. As they say in the rooms of recovery, we can’t think ourselves into right action, but we can act ourselves into right thinking. Let us act in love to assuage our hate and be exonerated from our murderous desires.

Do I think that hatred is as bad as murder? Why or why not?

*07*

“How does God’s love abide in anyone who has the world’s goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help?”

— 1 John 3:17

Main Idea: Love is not all sunshine and roses. The call to love compels us to do a serious self-inventory and confront the ways in which we have not loved as we ought.

Once at a wedding, the couple selected 1 John 4:11-21 as a reading. They wanted the passage read out of an heirloom bible belonging to a family member, and the reader obliged. The bible being old and small, the verses and chapter numbers were hard to make out, and so the reader accidentally began reading at 1 John 3:11, continuing dutifully until the end of the chapter. Few things will match the confusion on the face of the couple and those gathered as the reader joyfully admonished the couple not to murder one another as Cain did his brother Abel and to obey God’s commandments. Somehow the sermon still came together, and a good laugh was had by all at the reception.

Long after the wedding was over, the discomfort caused by the reading continued to sit with me. It was still a picture of love, just not the picture we like to focus on, especially at a wedding. On a celebratory day most of all, we like to focus on the joy of love. But 1 John 3 forces us to face the challenge that love presents to us. The simple question in verse 17 drives it home: “How does God’s love abide in anyone who has the world’s goods and yet sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help?” From the beginning, the message we have heard has been to love one another (3:11), and yet we have so often failed in that love. Our failure to love robs us of the assurance our hearts desire, leaving us feeling timid before the God who is greater than our hearts and knows everything.

It is important to sit with the sting of these passages, lest we let our discourse about love become too romantic and detached from the reality of love as we experience it. Just like in a wedding, we have a habit of dressing up what it means to love so as to ignore how it can weigh down on us. But sitting in the pews of your congregation—as in the pews of any wedding—there will be plenty of people whose experience of love does not look like the show put on by the betrothed. They will be sitting with experiences of divorce, fraying marriages, unrequited love, and judgments from others about their relationships in general. This passage gives us space to acknowledge the ways in which love or the lack of it keeps us up at night.

It’s not all gloom in 1 John 3. We see hints of the good news that is coming in the next chapter with verse 16a: “We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us,” and while we know we are not always or even often up to laying down our lives for one another, we are reminded that God’s love for us is not a reward for our success at loving one another but a remedy for our failure. Even as you sit with the challenge of this chapter, hold out that glimmer of hope.

*08*

“By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God.”

— 1 John 4:2

Don’t believe everyone you hear. That’s the essential takeaway from this, I think. Frankly, I’m not certain what is meant here by “spirit” in the sense that they can be tested—is it an individual’s spirit? Their motive? If we believe that the Holy Spirit lives in us and acts through us, then it stands to reason that we might need to recognize whether or not it’s the Holy Spirit acting through those around us or their own will (or, conversely, whether it’s the Holy Spirit acting in us, or just a projection of our own force of will).

I think it’s a lot harder than just a simple check-box. I know plenty of people who confess that “Jesus Christ has come in the flesh” but act directly conversely to the way of Jesus—people who speak hate, promote oppression, gossip, act selfishly, or create fear. Sometimes I’m the one who does these things. It’s essential that each of us engage in some kind of self-searching or introspection about what our true motives are with anything we say or do. I can be quite genius about justifying some action as for another person’s good, when really it’s just about me making myself feel more comfortable, or powerful, or superior in some way. And I’m absolutely someone who confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh.

I guess what I’m getting at is that (a) we need to test the spirits in ourselves, and (b) we need to be aware of the spirits in others. If actions and words come from a place of genuine love—the kind that accepts unconditionally, works for justice and peace, and demonstrates commitment to neighbor—then it’s a good bet it’s the Spirit of God. Anything else might need to be looked at a bit more closely.

How do I know whether the Holy Spirit is working through me? Do I take time to review my behavior and question my motives?

*09*“We are from God. Whoever knows God listens to us, and whoever is not from God does not listen to us. From this we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error.”

— 1 John 4:6

Again, these simple black-and-white dichotomies are a bit misleading, I think. Yes, we are absolutely from God. No question. Each and every one of us. But there’s the rub. That means that the guy who drives us nuts is also from God, even if his words or actions might indicate otherwise. Yet we are more and more polarized in our thinking about people and issues these days, so we are quick to fall into these dichotomies wherein anyone who agrees with us is “from God” and whoever disagrees with us is “not from God.” It’s sort of like praying for the outcome of a football game, as though God will bestow favor on one team over another. Yeah…no. Doesn’t work that way.

If I were pressed to apply this to our modern context, I might rephrase it this way: “We are from God. Whoever knows God is open to listening to the input and experience of those who are different from them, and whoever closes their mind and refuses to acknowledge anyone who disagrees with them is not from God. From this we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error.” But, you know, I didn’t write 1 John. So take my midrash with a grain of salt.

Is it possible to determine whether someone is “from God” or “not from God?”

*10*

“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.”

— 1 John 4:7-8

Now this dichotomy I can get behind. Call me fickle. But where love is concerned, I think the field is pretty black-and-white. Love is from God. In fact, as it says elsewhere in 1 John, God IS love. Of course we could get into the weeds trying to justify our own definitions of what love actually is, but I think Jesus was pretty clear in his modeling of it. Love is an action—it is working for the good of others even to laying down our lives for them. It doesn’t discriminate who is worthy or unworthy of our love. We are to love our neighbor (which is abso-friggin’-lutely everyone). Full stop.

This is not easy. Nope. If we try to compare our own acts of love to what Jesus did… Well we won’t even go there. But since God is love, and God loves us, and God lives in and through us and works in and through us, we have opportunity after opportunity to practice this kind of sacrificial love on the daily. And every time we do it, God and all the hosts of heaven are doing the wave, people! Even in small, simple acts of love for a child or a partner or a friend or a coworker we live into this truth that our love demonstrates that we are born of God and know God. (Even if five minutes later we completely blow it!)

When have I recently shown love to someone? What does it feel like to know that God celebrates this?

*11*

“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.”

— 1 John 4:10

While love can be a mutual act, it doesn’t have to be. Jesus makes it clear that the greatest commandment is to love God with all our hearts, souls, minds, and strength (and our neighbors as ourselves). But the writer of 1 John turns this on it’s head a little when he declares that our love for God isn’t the main thing—it only happens because God loved us first, so much that God showed up on the face of the planet in the body of a human being who took that love to the cross and went to hell and back for us. Like… I can’t even. We didn’t deserve it then, and no amount of loving God and neighbor makes us deserve it now. And yet, paradoxically, God declares that we absolutely deserved it then and deserve it now because God says so! Because God went and did it already! Honestly, when you really think about it, how can you not be overwhelmed with gratitude and joy?

Where do I see God’s love in action in my life?

*12*

“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.”

— 1 John 4:11-12

If you want to know what God looks like, look around you. The writer of 1 John says that no one has ever seen God, but then makes the point that God lives in us. Therefore, when we see each other, we see God. And it’s not just human beings. When I look at my cat, I see God. When I catch sight of an indigo bunting or a white-tailed deer or a massive cedar tree, I see God. When I hear Wind in the Leaves by Carbon Leaf or stare at Caravaggio’s Judith Beheading Holofernes on loan from Rome or someone recites some of Walt Whitman’s The Song of Myself to me, I encounter God. In the endless diversity of life and creation and creativity, we catch a glimpse of the One who dreamed us up and brought us into being and lives in the temples of our bodies and our spirits. I encourage you to take a moment to explore the world around you today and really recognize the face and presence of God—and then to express that presence in an act of love for someone else.

What things in my life most fill me with an assurance of the presence of God?

*13*

“God abides in those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God, and they abide in God.”

— 1 John 4:15

Abide (v): to continue in a place: SOJOURN (Merriam Webster) I know I’ve put this definition in devotions before, but somehow, no matter how many times I read it, I lose track of the sense of it. God sojourns (takes up temporary residence) in anyone who confesses Jesus, and we sojourn in God. So it’s more than just the idea that God lives in us, as I talked about yesterday. It’s also that we live in God. That we “live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28) in God. Or to steal from George Lucas’ description of the force, God “surrounds us, penetrates us, and binds the galaxy together.” (Yes, I am a complete nerd.) This mutuality, this reciprocity, is significant. We don’t just see God in all things, we exist in God—existence is God! From that vantage point, how can we deliberately cause harm to anyone or anything, knowing that to do so causes harm to God?

Of course we can’t be perfect in this regard. But, boy, if we really kept this reality in frame in our lives, and acted accordingly, how much better would the world be?

What does it mean to me that I abide in God, as God abides in me?

*14*

“God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.”

— 1 John 4:16b

Main Idea: Love is not abstract or ephemeral, but concrete and lived. We know that God is love because of what God has done for us in Jesus Christ, and from this we learn the true meaning of what it is for us to love one another.

Within the genre of love songs, there is the somewhat melancholy group of ballads which wrestle with the nature of love and our uncertainty about it. Sometimes, the cause for this question is the emergence of new feelings and desires that we can’t quite describe. “Is this love that I’m feeling?” asks Bob Marley. “I want to know.” Marley wants to share his shelter, his room, his bed with someone. Is this love, or is it something else? Other times, the question arises from deep hurt surrounding disappointment with love. “What is love?” asks Haddaway, continuing with the earnest plea, “Baby, don’t hurt me, don’t hurt me, no more.” Other times, the question testifies to a desire to overcome heartbreak and give love another go. “In my life, there's been heartache and pain, I don't know if I can face it again,” admits Mick Jones of Foreigner before crying out, “I want to know what love is!”

Sadly, 1 John is not a power ballad, but it still has something to say about love that is as poetic as any of the lyrics above. “Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love” (1 John 4:8). We too want to know what love is, and here we are given the answer. Were the chapter to stop there, we would just have an overly saccharine pop number. Where this idea finds its truth and depth is in what follows. “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,” (1 John 4:9-10a). Here the author builds on the themes about love from Chapter 3. God’s love is not an abstract love, coming to us from far off like the words of a sympathetic chorus cheering you on. The truth and action of love referred to earlier (3:18) are God’s incarnate and self-giving for us in Jesus Christ. This is what it mean for God to love us.

Just like the children of God that we named in 1 John 3, we too are meant to be like God in this way. That is also an aspect of love we learn about in these verses. “Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. […] We love because he first loved us” (3:11, 19). Just as our joy is completed in sharing the good news with others, God’s love finds its completion in us as it makes us into instruments through which God’s love is experienced and known. The revelation that God’s love is incarnate and self-giving reveals the character of our love as well.

*15*

“Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness on the day of judgement, because as he is, so are we in this world.”

— 1 John 4:17

That sounds like a tall order. But the writer of 1 John isn’t saying “you ought to do thus and so in order that love will be perfected in you.” They’re saying it’s already done. That because of God’s love, because God is love, and we are God’s beloved children, that love is perfected in our very being. As God is—love—so are we in this world. We are love. Ponder that for a moment, and allow yourself to bask in the notion that this isn’t something you have to do, but is the state of who you are. Then consider the notion that this is not only who you are, but who everyone around you is—every single person, every animal, plant, ecosystem, incidence of God’s creation. God spoke all that is into being in, with, and through love. And being created in God’s image, we are love.

So the question is not how we can go about perfecting God’s love, but about how we can go about expressing it to one another and the world.

What does it mean to me to consider the idea that I am the embodiment of God’s love? How might such and idea influence my way of being in the world?

*16*

“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.”

— 1 John 4:18

Fear is insidious, pervasive, and, unfortunately, inevitable. I once had a fellow in my recovery program tell me that if I was still having fears, it meant I really didn’t have a higher power. In the moment, I was devastated. After processing it with other fellows, I was able to call bulls--- on him. In spite of what the writer of 1 John says here, I believe that we are still fully the reflection of God’s perfect love in the world even if we still have fears.

What matters isn’t the fact that we experience fear, but how we respond to those fears. Do we let them drive us to acting out against others in some futile obsession with obtaining total security? Do we let them keep us from standing up for others in need? Do we let them make us hide in our own cocoons rather than loving fully in ways that will uplift us as much as those we share that love with? Working to overcome our fears is working to express God’s perfected love in us with the world. It is hard work, but it is good work.

What fears hold me back from living fully into God’s call to love?

*17*

“We love because he first loved us.”

— 1 John 4:19

God is love. We are created in God’s image. Therefore we are love. We love because God, in love, created us in the image of God’s love. This isn’t just about erotic love or familial love or any sort of love that is confined to the sense of a “feeling.” This love is an action. It is creation. It is connection. It is service. It is sacrificial and transformational and mind-blowing.

This isn’t just about trying to emulate some ideal God has for us. This is about being who and what we were created to be in the first place and already are.

In God’s ultimate act through Jesus on the cross, we caught a glimpse of the depth and breadth and incomprehensibility of the love that God is, and that God created us to be. In the beginning, God created the world in love, ergo, we love. In the cross, God reiterated, proclaimed, blew the doors off love, ergo, we love.

Of course we can’t take it for granted. Again, it’s not about feeling. It’s about action. God’s love calls us to act in love each day in every interaction we have with the whole of creation.

Where have I shown God’s love in my interactions today? How can I make a practice of noticing all the ways I lean into my identity as God’s love?

*18*

“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.”

— 1 John 4:20

“But who is my brother or sister?” (to paraphrase the lawyer who tested Jesus in Luke 10:29). It’s too easy to limit the call to love in the “action” sense of the word to those we, frankly, already love in the “feeling” sense of the word. I have no problem being of service, even sacrificial service, to my kids or my friends. But how good am I at stepping outside of my comfort zone to act in love for someone I don’t really care for. Maybe they drive me a little nuts or they’ve been mean to me or they don’t share my political or religious views. Can I be of ungrudging love and service to “them?”

The writer of 1 John’s words are harsh and direct. If I find someone unworthy of an expression of love, can I say I love God? If, as I’ve been saying in the past few days, God is love and we are created in God’s image to be love, how can we possibly justify treating another human being with anything less?

Just as with responding to fear, this is not easy. It’s not black and white. Because while we are created to be love in God’s image, we are also still human beings, products of our genetics, our environment, our social systems, our survival instincts, etc. and these things can make us lose sight of who we really are. God still loves us no matter what, and because of this, we can keep trying without the harsh self-condemnation that if we mess up even once we are “liars” and don’t love God.

Do I beat myself up when I fail to live up to my own ideals for loving others? How do I deal with my own backlash?

*19*

“Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God, and everyone who loves the parent loves the child.”

— 1 John 5:1

Let me blatantly disregard the beginning of this statement. I’m fairly certain that everyone, regardless of their beliefs, has been born of God, so I’m going to just move on.

If we are born of God—created in God’s image, beloved and made to love—then if we love God, we will love God’s children. And if everyone is God’s child, if we love God, we will love everyone (and everything—I include all of creation as our siblings).

Now, on a worldly level, I’ve gotta be honest. I know some parents I like whose kids I’m not fond of. In fact, I hated (and still don’t love) babysitting because I pretty much can’t stand other people’s kids on their own turf. (Teaching is a bit different for me, but I don’t want to digress any further than I already am!) But this falls back into that love as “feeling” rather than love as “action.” Yes, of course, if someone I adore asks me to take care of their child for a bit, you bet I will, and with joy (especially because I know I get to give them back). Maybe there’s the lesson for today—we don’t have to like being of love and service all the time, but we sure as heck need to bring our love “A game” when God asks us to look after one of God’s beloved children (or all of them). And in the end, creation belongs to God—it’s God’s child, and God will ultimately take it back and be in charge of it (after all, we won’t live forever). So we can happily, ungrudgingly care for God’s creation simply because we love God so much.

When have I been of love and service to someone I wasn’t particularly fond of? How did that experience affect the way I feel about love?

*20*

“By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and obey his commandments. For the love of God is this, that we obey his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome.”

— 1 John 5:2-3

This depends on our attitude, I think. God’s commandments—to love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength, and our neighbors as ourselves—don’t sound too hard. But as we’ve been delving into what love actually means, and our identity as God’s beloved children and of love itself, it’s become clear that these commandments aren’t easy. They bang up against our outsized desire for self-preservation or esteem or security and we have to work—sometimes pretty hard—to set these things aside in order to live into our call.

What helps me are daily spiritual practices, most of which stem from my recovery community. I read recovery literature and write a reflection on it every day. I pray and meditate. I write a minimum of five gratitudes each day. When fears or resentments crop up, I have tools to work through them with God’s help. I make amends as soon as I recognize where I’ve blown it with someone in some way. Taken together, these spiritual practices (and others) are about surrendering my will and my life to the care of God, and being open to what the next right action is. These “next right actions” are always born out of love—for God, for neighbor, or for self (in the healthy way)—and thus I can practice myself into loving behavior.

I don’t do this perfectly. I have to use those tools on resentments and fears more than I’d like. I have to make amends now and then (far, far less than I used to) and it’s a good reminder to stay humble. But in all, it really is a design for living that works under all circumstances. Thus, I can adjust my attitude to truly believe that God’s commandments are not burdensome, but, in fact, can be a transformational joy.

What practices in my daily life help me to frame God’s call to love others in the best possible way?

*21*

“And this is the victory that conquers the world, our faith.”

— 1 John 5:4b

Main Idea: Faith has a role to play in how 1 John understands our relationship to God. Here we see how faith and love work together to build our relationship with God through Christ.

The hero’s back is up against the wall. Their allies are down, their resources are depleted, and nothing seems able to avert their inevitable doom. But then, what’s this? Just when all hope seems lost, a voice is heard in the distance, a shadow appears in the doorway, and lo! An old mentor thought dead, an erstwhile foe who experienced a change of heart, whomever it is—help has come. The day is saved. And though we tell ourselves that we all knew it was coming, accompanying our cheer is also a sigh of relief and a lowering of our blood pressure. It feels good to know that the ending we wanted for everyone is now secure.

We all love dramatic entrances like these, and 1 John does not disappoint. Up until now, we’ve heard a lot about love and had our ups and downs. We’ve experienced both the comfort that the love of God brings and the challenge that love presents to how we live our lives. As we enter into the final chapter of 1 John, we come to see that there is still one more character to step into the story: faith. And when faith finally makes its debut in 1 John, it is as the victory which conquers the world. What an introduction! Why was the author holding out on us for so long? If we are experienced with Pauline canon, we expect faith to make an appearance front and center. In the Johannine Cinematic Universe, however, our authors approach from the perspective of love. What role, then, does faith play? How do we understand faith as victory when, up until this point, love seemed to have all the basis covered?

Admittedly, 1 John does not give us much to work with. Faith here is not treated in nearly as much depth as in the letters of Paul, and unlike the letter of James, 1 John is not in direct conversation with the works of Paul. Belief that Jesus Christ is the Son of God seems to be the sum of faith for the author of 1 John, and that this belief stands alongside love. As we heard two weeks ago, “And this is the commandment, that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us” (3:23). That John articulates the nature of faith so simply helps give us clarity: faith is what points us to Jesus Christ as the Son of God as the source of our love, as we heard last week in 1 John 4. Faith may make a second act appearance, but really, it was working in the background the whole time. It is our trust in God’s love for us revealed in the death and resurrection of Christ which produces the same love as this in us, oriented toward our neighbors. Faith may have been late to the party, but it showed up to provide essential aid that saves the day.

*22*

“For whatever is born of God conquers the world. And this is the victory that conquers the world, our faith. Who is it that conquers the world but the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?”

— 1 John 5:4-5

I’m no fan of military, imperialist terminology. The idea of conquering something feels inherently violent to me—taking away something else’s autonomy in favor of my own will. Particularly in a context like this where the writer is saying that a particular ideology needs to stamp out all others. In our current, painfully polarized culture and political context, it sends up all sorts of red flags for me.

But I have to step back and look at it more objectively—it’s the only way to find the gospel message among the easily cherry-picked language of religious nationalism here.

The writer of 1 John has been talking about “the world” quite a bit up until now, and by it, they mean all those trappings of society that pull us away from God: obsession with self, pursuit of pleasures for their own sake to the exclusion of others needs, and the like. This “world” definitely needs conquering, that is, it needs a new set of guiding principles to replace the self-centered driving force behind our current way of being in the world.

This new set of guiding principles is the one lived by, in, and through Jesus: sacrificial love for God, neighbor, and self, for the flourishing of all creation. If we truly believe that Jesus is God’s embodiment of this kind of love, i.e. “the Son of God,” this becomes the foundation of a faith that such a transformation of individuals and society is possible, and that faith becomes the driving force behind our action to bring about a more just and peaceful world. This is something I can totally get behind!

How do I reconcile the gospel message of peace with military/violent idioms in the Bible?

*23*

“This is the one who came by water and blood, Jesus Christ, not with the water only but with the water and the blood. And the Spirit is the one that testifies, for the Spirit is the truth. There are three that testify: the Spirit and the water and the blood, and these three agree.”

— 1 John 5:6-8

Water and blood. Not just water, a sign of God’s presence, holiness, baptism, spirit, but also blood, a sign of embodiedness, creaturely-ness. The Holy Spirit, which is God, proclaims the truth of Jesus’ divinity and humanity, that which makes him the “Son of God,” our faith in whom “conquers the world” (see yesterday).

Frankly this text is a little mystifying, but that’s what comes up for me when I try to wrestle some sense out of it for the purposes of living into it today (and thank goodness that theology is never static, so that what it brings up for us in the moment is more than sufficient to God’s purposes!) It’s a beautiful reminder that as Jesus is both divine and human, so we house God’s divinity in us along with our embodiedness. And we get to see Jesus in one another and in all of creation and be called into mutually sacrificial love and service for one another. (I am not claiming that each of us is God, as Jesus is God, but that God in Christ is in each of us fully and works through us as we encounter each other and the world.) As God’s children, we are born of water and blood and Spirit, and that’s way cool.

What does it mean to me to “come by” (be born of) water and blood?

*24*

“If we receive human testimony, the testimony of God is greater; for this is the testimony of God that he has testified to his Son.”

— 1 John 5:9

In other words, listen to what Jesus has to say. Lot’s of people have lots of things to tell us about who we should be and how we should be and, more troubling, how other people should be and how we should make them be the way we want them to be. It’s kind of important in discerning God’s voice in the world to take a close look at what Jesus actually said (and what Jesus glaringly did not say… as in a single thing about homosexuality or abortion, for example). Yes, there are places where Jesus says, essentially, if you don’t believe in him you’re going to hell. Kinda troubling (and makes me wonder if he really said that or if his followers used that to make themselves feel better for all the abuse they were suffering for believing in him—which, of course, I can’t say for sure). If you find yourself hung up on those couple of statements, maybe step back and look at the larger picture of what Jesus said. Love God and your neighbor as yourself. Blessed are the peacemakers and the merciful. The Spirit of the Lord has anointed me to bring good news to the poor, proclaim release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor. Stuff like that. Or listen to the loud volumes spoken by his actions. Healing on the Sabbath, crossing boundaries, touching lepers, talking to women, speaking truth to power.

We can receive human testimony about who Jesus is, but God’s testimony—God’s words out of Jesus’ mouth and actions—is greater.

How do I discern what is truth about what Jesus would have me be in relation to the world around me?

*25*

“Those who believe in the Son of God have the testimony in their hearts. Those who do not believe in God have made him a liar by not believing in the testimony that God has given concerning his Son.”

— 1 John 5:10

Forgive me for inhabiting our modern religious-political context, but I see this as a word of warning quite relevant to the present moment. As I wrote yesterday, it’s critical for us to distinguish between human (and therefore highly flawed) interpretations of what God wants for our society and what God spoke clearly through Jesus about the same thing. There is a strong movement (or at least incredibly vocal, if not nearly a majority) of folks who want to impose their own highly-specific and seriously oppressive understanding of Christianity on everyone, and they justify it in all sorts of ways, not least of all insisting it’s God’s will. Yet if we look with complete honesty at (a) what Jesus actually said (and didn’t say) about many of these things and (b) our own motives in wanting others to behave in a particular way just so we can be comfortable and secure, we absolutely must reject out of hand this movement and its ideals. The “testimony that God has given concerning his Son” is found in Jesus’ words of love, peace, justice (political, economic) for all people, and self-sacrifice on behalf of our neighbors. If we claim these things are untrue (or just ignore them completely in favor of our own beliefs about right and wrong) we make God a liar. Strong words. But God was pretty clear in Jesus about changing the status quo in favor of the powerless. So if your agenda concentrates power in the hands of wealthy, white, cisgender, straight, men of a certain religious understanding, you are saying God’s plan is wrong. So, um, yeah. Say that if you want to. But you certainly can’t claim it’s God’s will. It’s not. Thank you for coming to my Ted Talk.

Do I behave in ways contrary to what I believe my religious tradition calls me to? Is that an issue with my behavior or my religious tradition?

*26*

“And this is the testimony: God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life.”

— 1 John 5:11-12

Be careful how you interpret this. “Having the Son” does not mean following a specific religious or political interpretation of God’s will. The fact is that God freely and unconditionally gave God’s self in Christ Jesus to each and every single one of us and all of creation without exception. We all “have the Son.” Full stop.

Yes, of course I know this isn’t what the writer of 1 John meant. He was specifically making a distinction between believers—early Christians—and all those who rejected Jesus as God’s messiah. But context matters and that was then and this is now. “The Way” of Jesus followed by the early Christians bears little to no resemblance to modern Christianity. And modern western Christians are not being harassed, arrested, and murdered on the regular for their religious beliefs (despite their claims to the contrary because they’re not allowed to discriminate against people who don’t agree with them).

For us today, we would do well to celebrate God’s incomprehensible gift of life in and through Jesus Christ, freely given to everyone equally and without exception. We may feel at times that we do not “have life” for one reason or another—sometimes through no fault of our own, sometimes because we stubbornly refuse to accept this gift. But the truth is that God continues to lavish life on us whether we feel it (or feel we deserve it) or not. May God help you to find joy in that life today and always.

Where do I recognize God’s incredible gift of life in Jesus on a day-to-day basis?

*27*

“I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have eternal life.”

— 1 John 5:13

Words of hope, to be sure. Life isn’t easy. It’s just not. Whether the Romans are arresting your friends and feeding them to lions in the Colosseum or you just lost a loved one to a terminal illness it can be easy to doubt the goodness of God. How can the good news of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection be true if so many things still, quite frankly, suck? How can we navigate the tension between the “already” of Jesus’ resurrection and the “not yet” of a renewed, whole, and just creation in God’s reign?

We do it together. We lean into community. We speak words of hope to one another. We walk in solidarity. We hold each other in prayer. We celebrate all the little miracles we experience each day. We invite God into everything we say and do and know that God answers the invitation with joy. We cry with each other. We rejoice with each other. We participate fully in the Body of Christ. And through this communal interdependence, we remind each other that we have eternal life now and always.

How can I speak words of hope to someone today?

*28*

“Those who believe in the Son of God have the testimony in their hearts.”

— 1 John 5:10a

Main Idea: Faith is not something we accomplish. Rather, faith is worked in us through the actions of the one in whom we have our faith.

Imagine the following scene: you are leaving the grocery store when, out of nowhere, a car pulls up, and a stranger opens the door saying, “Get in quick!” You start to protest, but they continue, “It’s an emergency; no time to explain!” What do you do? Probably run! At the very least, you’d have some questions. But now imagine the same scenario with one crucial difference: instead of a stranger, it is your oldest and dearest friend who calls to you. Does your response change? Probably! How different this scenario becomes when the one who calls to us changes. Did you decide to doubt one and trust the other? Some thought might have gone into it, but chances are your response was more reflexive than cognitive. Because the choice to trust your friend was not yours. You trusted your friend not because of a decision you made but because of how your friend lived their life for you. It was their history of faithful speech, of trustworthy action, and of loving care that worked trust in you. What you did was simply what sprung naturally from the trust they worked in you.

Trust is the best way we have to understand what it means to have faith, and this aspect of trust is what is being drawn out here in 1 John 5. When the author writes that, “Those who believe in the Son of God have the testimony of God in their hearts,” they are pointing us to the origins of faith. Our belief in God is worked into our hearts through the proclamation of what God has done for us. Through the word of God, we hear and come to know who God is, how much God loved us, and what sort of grace God has given us in Jesus Christ. Through these words and deeds, we come to have faith in our hearts, which is nothing less than the testimony of God’s love for us.

Our last verse today is the beginning of the epilogue, which brings us right back to where we began when we heard that, “We are writing these things so that our joy may be complete” (1:4). Now we see clearly what that joy is, namely the knowledge of all that God has done for us, the love that God has shown for us through these deeds, and the new relationship that has forged by that love born out for us. Our joy is complete when our trust is in God, and this is not our doing. What makes faith a joy is that it has nothing to do with what we have done but everything to do with what God has done for us.

*29*

“And this is the boldness we have in him, that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. And if we know that he hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have obtained the requests made of him.”

— 1 John 5:14-15

Key words: “According to God’s will.” This doesn’t mean it’s not God’s will that we get some specific material item or particular outcome in a given situation, but it does mean (to me, anyway) that these aren’t the types of things we’re supposed to pray for. We’re supposed to pray for God’s will for our lives. Not in the horrific “it’s God’s will that your child died tragically” way (it is never ever God’s will that someone die tragically). But in the “What would you have me to today, God, to live out your call to sacrificial love and service to you, my neighbor, and myself?” Anne Lamott says the only prayers are “help me” “thank you” and “wow.” This prayer, above, falls into the “help me” category. “Help me be who and how you want me to be.” I pray this because I know that God will help me to do just this and that, when I do it with God’s help, I will experience peace and serenity around what is (even if I don’t like it), courage and motivation to act where necessary (even if it’s hard) and discernment of my next right action. I’ll have acceptance of others and myself. I’ll feel accomplished. And I’ll experience the presence and action of God in my life and all of creation in ways I hadn’t thought possible. These outcomes lead to the prayers of “thank you” and “wow.”

I am bold each morning to ask God to show me what it is God wants of me, and for the willingness to do what that requires. And frankly, that takes a fair amount of boldness!

What does boldness in prayer look like to me?

*30*

“If you see your brother or sister committing what is not a mortal sin, you will ask, and God will give life to such a one—to those whose sin is not mortal. There is sin that is mortal; I do not say that you should pray about that. All wrongdoing is sin, but there is sin that is not mortal.”

— 1 John 5:16-17

Is there really such thing as Mortal sin? Is there a sin that is absolutely unforgivable and results in a “Go to hell. Go directly to hell. Do not pass ‘Go.’ Do not collect $200.” card? Honestly, I don’t buy it. So much so that—probably sacrilegiously—I kind of laughed out loud when I read the “Yeah, there are mortal sins, but we’re not going to touch that” line.

Sin is sin, I think. And sin is simply obsession with self—specifically looking to ourselves to be god in our own lives. This obsession drives every single form of outward behavior that could be classified as “sin” in terms of causing harm to self, neighbor, or creation. Nasty words. Physical violence. Dishonesty. Littering. Complicity in systems that oppress others (which, sadly, is pervasive and seemingly unavoidable, but is still sin in my book—yep, I’m a sinner.)

The good news is that all of this sin is forgivable—God gives us life in spite of them. Also good news is that all of this sin can be overcome with God’s help. We can pray for God to remove our sins and for God to help us discern the necessary changes in our choices and behaviors and the willingness to practice alternative behavior. It’s a lifelong undertaking, but if we’re committed to it, if nothing else we’ll develop plenty of humility, which itself goes a long way to helping us give up our self-obsession.

Mortal sin? We won’t even talk about that. (LOL)

How do I define “sin”? How do I address my own sins on a day to day basis?

*31*

“We know that those who are born of God do not sin, but the one who was born of God protects them, and the evil one does not touch them.”

— 1 John 5:18

This makes it sound like sin comes to us externally. And maybe that’s true in some ways. We are all products of our life experience, our genetics, and a host of other environmental circumstances. My innate perfectionism, which I did not choose to have, driven by my anxiety disorder, which I also did not choose to have, led me to try to run the entire universe in order to feel okay in the world (because, you know, God was busy doing way more important things). So that essence of sin, which is turning inward to self, was perhaps thrust upon me by circumstances beyond my control.

And yet.

The exercise of trying to determine the origin of sin is kind of pointless, because we can’t go back and reverse the past, edit our genetic makeup, or magically transport ourselves into a better environment. We are who we are in the here and now and, I’m sorry to say, our sin is our own problem to deal with.

When we are in communication with God, through regular spiritual practices (whatever that looks like for you and anyone else), we can allow ourselves to be protected from the world’s crushing pressure to turn inward and be sinful. We can practice loving and serving others, because we know it is God’s will for us and God will help us do it. We can turn over to God all the things we can’t control (which, let’s face it, is pretty much everything) and turn outward from our insatiable need for security.

Simple, yes. Easy? No. But remember that we are born of God, and while I disagree with the writer of 1 John that this renders us free of sin, it does allow us to open ourselves to God’s protection and care, and inspiration in the hard work of loving our neighbors.

Do I blame my upbringing or circumstances for my misguided choices or bad behavior?