PERFECT LOVE CAST OUT FEAR

1 John 4:5-21

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“All you need is love, (repeat 3xs) it’s easy, love is all you need.

Well, if there is one thing, I am certain of it is that we sure could learn a whole lot from dogs. Or, animals in general. My dog Polly is now a full grown 2-year-old (or in dog years a four-teen year old.) And yet when it comes to sharing space, sometimes I swear she defies that conclusion and she’s still growing! When we settle in to watch a movie together on the couch, everytime, without fail; somehow there is barely enough room – just enough room for me - and once I squeeze in, she’ll prop her nose up on my lap in her silent command for me to “stay.” There’s room for me, but not for much room for anything else.

The same is true for the kind of love that the apostle John is describing between Father and Son; and Christ and his Church. This kind of selfless, sacrificial love is so all encompassing that it’s like there is a “no vacancy” sign on the sofa of our Christian lives for much of anything else. When the love of Jesus fills all space; in our communities, our lives, and our congregations; there really isn’t any vacancy for any fear or any hatred! Like the old familiar Christian Children’s song, when it comes to the love of Jesus, it’s deep and wide. “Deep and wide, there’s a fountain flowing deep and wide. Deep and wide, deep and wide there’s a fountain flowing deep and wide.”

So, here we are; still basking in the light of the glory of Jesus’ resurrection this Eastertide - Sunday morning; and John is so eloquently trying to convey to the reader what the love of God and his Son Jesus look like and why it matters to us as the Church. In verse 14 John harkens back to Jesus’ own teaching of today’s gospel reading about “abiding in God’s love,” just as the vine and the branches abide together (John 15). John even repeats some of his teachings from the first part of this letter in that much of this passage in (chapter 4) sounds identical to chapter 3, so much so that I actually had to double-check to make sure I had not accidentally gone back to last week’s lectionary. As I mentioned a couple of weeks ago John mentions Love more than any other book in the bible. 35 times to be exact.

So, if I read it right, if we can just receive and fully understand the love that God has for us and how that fills all space - and allow love takes over our lives’ the same way a little beagle dominates a standard-sized sofa; there won’t be any room left for fear.

In verse 18, John doesn’t mince words on what God’s love does to fear. The New Revised Standard Version says that love casts out fear – a kind of flinging -that creates far more than just a six-foot social distancing between fear and love. The Message Bible translation says that love banishes fear – a rejection, followed by a blunt, ‘no trespassing sign.’ Which is exactly what we should do since fear is a liar. As we stand in God’s love – it has no chance.

There is, however, one little wrinkle in this text that I would like to focus on - and that is the idea that true, perfect love casts out fear. Fear; in Greek is the word ‘Phobos” that John uses here, and it is equivalent to our English word that gives us so many other words ending in “-phobia.” Many of us live with such phobias: fear of heights, fear of enclosed spaces, fear of cats.  There are some strange ones out there.  Hippophobia is fear of falling asleep.  Heliophobia is a fear of the sun. Or maybe John was identifying something in the Christian community that resembled something closer to Charlie Brown’s depression-inducing pantaphobia – which is when someone’s general outlook on life is always fearful. Yes, when Lucy was analyzing him, she asks Charlie; “do you think you have pantaphobia?” He responds; “what’s that?” She said “fear of everything.” To which he replied; “That’s it!”

And as a pastor I am also familiar with another fear expressed by those who are ending their earthly journey asking; “How can I be sure I did enough for God to love me? Does God really play all the sins of my life on some giant screen that passes before my eyes? How do I know there is grace sufficient even for me?” That clearly seems to be what John is pointing to here. But if we abide in God’s love for us—like the vine and the branches—then we know God’s grace is sufficient and we will not fear judgment. I always like the parables in Matthew and Luke about “how much more”. If we humans can forgive, how much more can our heavenly father forgive? If we can love, how much more can our heavenly father love us?

At the birth of my sons; I have very clear memories of holding both of my twin sons, one under each arm like little footballs, just moments after their births. I remember experiencing a flood of emotion, and an overwhelming sense of wonder. Looking at their little toes and fingernails, and running my fingers through their little whisps of hair, I was convinced that I had never love anyone else ever as much. But, why? Why did I love them so much then? They hadn’t done anything yet. They hadn’t accomplished some great feat, and they hadn’t done anything for me at all, lifting heavy boxes or programming the remote control for me. But I still loved them for who they were: they were mine. An in that moment, and every moment since, I have loved them. Whether they have made me proud or are on my last nerve and every day in-between; as we approach Mother’s Day next week, this text is such a great reminder of how for we mothers can glimpse the kind of love that John is talking about. The love of God that I might never have understood otherwise. Parental love.

This is the love of God, as God cares for us and gently holds us in the palm of his hand. God doesn’t love us because we do things for Him. God doesn’t love us because of our great feats and accomplishments. God doesn’t love us because we’re good. God loves us, because we are His. Whether we make Him proud, or are on His last nerve, failing to live up to even the most basic Christian expectations. He loves us still. Despite it all. Through it all. We are His.

So yes, understanding God’s perfect love toward us should keep us from the fear of dying and judgment. And yet; a lot of this passage is not about our behavior toward God but our behavior toward others. If John is talking about fear of God’s judgment—and it seems he is—then how does this relate to our treatment of other people in the church or in the world generally?

I suspect we already know the answer: fearful people tend to be unpleasant people—even sometimes downright nasty people. I know when I feel vulnerable, I can feel I need to defend myself. Not always, I mean some people are too sad to be unkind toward others. Their fears lead them to retreat from life, to be quiet. I know I feel like I need an advocate at times. Someone to stand with me. Yet, some just knee jerk reacts and are cruel. These days the ability to say thoughtless things we don’t really mean has become so easy in our isolation, we don’t even have to look one another in the eye on face-less text messages, emails and voice messaging. Lobbing accusations and insults on social media and in print, happens most often between people who have never met. There are many explanations for this rise in such uncivilized behavior toward one another - but 9 times out of 10, if you traced it back to its root cause, you would find some version or another of fear. Fear of losing, fear of the stranger, fears of this and that and the other thing and if we drill deeper it can be traced back to a fundamental fear that we don’t believe that God is in control. Maybe God doesn’t have the whole world in his hands after all. The less sure you are about God’s unconditional love toward you, the more fear has an opportunity to rule our thoughts. And the greater you fear, the more likely it is you will find it hard to treat other people with the love of God because we feel vulnerable and so much of life will feel threatening. What a vicious cycle. The only way to break the cycle is to realize we do have an advocate who is asking us to choose love. We have to choose one or the other. Perfect love casts out fear. Love or fear. What you dwell on expands.

The apostle John would probably agree with all those assertions. But in reality, and especially during a crisis; fear doesn’t seem so easy to cast out or banish. It always seems to creep back in and take up whatever little space on the sofa is left. I can’t help but wonder if apostle John is asking something different of us, calling us to be gentler and more honest with ourselves. Perhaps he is inviting us to recognize those trigger words these days – those things that make us feel afraid and bring them to that small space of unconditional love left on the sofa. Perhaps he is inviting us to let the love of Jesus do the work of casting out fear for us; but first, we have to be honest about those fears. We must name them. And we have to choose love over fear.

If there is one thing for certain – so many hidden fears have been brought to the surface in the last 12 months. The fear of getting sick, the fear of dying and suffering; the fear of churches not opening up again, the fear of no internet, the fear of live stream failing when that is all we had and the fear of losing connections with one another.

It’s only natural - as much as we don’t like the way fear feels, somehow it lingers and we find ourselves going back to it. The climax of today’s text is when John warns us that fear surrounding our differences can fester into the dangerous territory of hatred. In verse 20 he writes the familiar verse we recite every communion Sunday; “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.” Or in other words; “if you love God you must love your brothers and sisters too.” There is no room for fear and no space on the sofa for hatred.

Like us; John has experienced the fear and witnessed the hatred. And with a healthy mix of compassion, gentleness, and truth-telling, he names what is hindering the kingdom of Jesus’ love from being all God intends it to be: the hindrance is when we do not love the man or woman standing right in front of us. Do we treat anyone in the body of Christ different from someone else or with disdain because of their political persuasion or life style choice?” We should ask ourselves today; who are we withholding love from, and why?

These are the questions Love demands us to ask, questions that can fill the space left by Love. These are the questions some of us fear because like death they are beyond anything we can control; and of course, we fear what we can’t control.

In Polly 9my dogs) world; perfect love is one where I, or whoever the closest human is, obeys her silent command of a wet nose propped on the human knee to “stay.” To abide. To abide with the healing presence of God who meets us in the honesty of our fear and fill us with such love that there is no longer room for fear to stay. But we are Easter people. We are resurrection people and resurrection take over the whole sofa with a love that leaves no room for fear and hate.

Love or fear. Choose love. What you focus on expands!

Let us pray: Gracious God, indeed we are only able to love because you first loved us. Expand that love within us as individuals and among us as your body so that we might provide with our very lives spaces for your love to grow. Through Jesus, you have taught us to love one another, to love our neighbors as ourselves, and even to love our enemies. In times of violence and fear, let the peace of Christ rule in our hearts, so that we may not be overcome with evil - but overcome evil with good. Help us to see each person in light of the love and grace you have shown us in Christ. Help us to turn off and wake up from the nightmares of terror to the realization of the dawning of your new creation. Establish among us a future where peace reigns, justice is done with mercy, and all are reconciled. We ask these things in the name and for the sake of Jesus Christ our Lord. We lift up the names of those who are sick and lonely…..Amen.

Invocation: Merciful and loving God; this is the day that you have made therefore we join with angels in the chorus that rises throughout all the earth, rejoicing and we are grateful for this day. You take our endings and you make your new beginnings. You surprise and astound us in places where we expected that you were absent. Be with us this hour as we worship and praise you as your word challenges us to reconsider all that is possible. In Jesus name Amen.

Benediction: Put on the full armor of God. God blesses you with every gift needful to do His work, and the Holy Spirit grants you the courage to choose love in the face of fear. For what you dwell on expands. Be love.