

First Presbyterian Church
Bozeman, Montana
Dan Krebill, co-pastor

September 16, 2018
24th Sunday in Ordinary Time
1 John 4:7-12

God Is Love

Today we are officially launching an all-church emphasis that will be the focus of our attention for the next 8 months. Perhaps you saw it on your way into the church this morning. It's on our bulletin cover and you'll be seeing it in our newsletter and other publications. Learning and Living God's Love, Together. It's a theme that our church session of elected ruling elders developed over the summer as we reflected on where it is we believe God is leading us as a community of faith. Learning and Living God's Love, Together.

Last year, at this time, we began a year-long focus on discerning our call as God's followers of Jesus. During the year we celebrated the many different ways that God has called people across the ages as recalled in the Bible. And we celebrated the many different ways that God has called and continues to call us in our day, and in our church. We commissioned and re-commissioned various groups of folks from our congregation in the many ministries that are carried out in our church and in our community. As we brought that emphasis on call to a conclusion last spring, there was a real sense of renewal for many in our church family as they live out their faith.

One of the questions that the session continued to ponder as we went through the months of our Year of Call, is where might this be leading us together us as a church. In other words, as we lifted up and celebrated the many different ways individuals and groups of individuals live out their call from God, could it be that there is a call for us as a particular congregation as we live and work and witness in our community? Who is it that we are as a congregation, and what is it that we do in our setting that distinguishes us as a Christian congregation in a community of dozens of other faithful Christian congregations?

As we reflected on these questions, we observed that a common strand could be found in each of the many calls that we celebrate, that is the living out and the sharing of God's love. Now let me be quick to say that it wasn't the foundational love that caught our attention, because, of course, God's love is the basis for everything we do as Christian disciples. What did catch our attention is how we carry out these ministries often without thinking about or reflecting on just how profound it is—that is, God's love. Could it be that if we were to spend some focused time and energy on examining and exploring this love of God, we might become even stronger as a congregation and church family.

As this theme then came together, it became clear that as great and worthy is our pursuit of studying God's love, that it would be and could be even stronger if we also emphasized the living out that love—and to do it together, as companions on this journey.

So what we're in for this year is another year of celebration of how God is at work in all that we do in God's name, while we will also review, remember and recall just how fundamentally central love is to it all. And to discover new ways that we can work together to live out God's love. So Learning and Living God's Love, Together is where we're headed starting right now.

The Bible is filled with stories, testimonies and other evidence of God's love. Over the next several months, we're going to be taking a closer look at many of these scriptures that will help us to learn God's love and then to live God's love.

As we begin this exploration, it's important to emphasize that God's love is found throughout the scriptures of the Old Testament as well as the New Testament. Somewhere along the way, there came to be a popular misunderstanding or mischaracterization of God that suggested that God is portrayed as a God of judgment and punishment in the Old Testament; and that in the New Testament, God is portrayed as loving and forgiving and full of grace. Or this misunderstanding stated more simply: God of judgement in the Old Testament and God of love in the New Testament.

This dichotomy is simply not correct. While many scriptures can be quoted in support of it, the truth is that just as many can be quoted to counter it.

For example, we need not look any further than the words of the Old Testament psalm that we read earlier in the service. Psalm 121 is a sumptuous testimony to the loving care that God extends to us. "I lift up my eyes to the hills—from where will my help come? My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth." (Ps. 121:1) This single verse testifies to God's loving care for his creatures in the creation of the world itself—the earth that provides for all of our needs.

We'll be reading and hearing much more about God's love from the pages of the Old Testament as the year unfolds.

When we consider the New Testament that is filled with evidence of God's love, some might immediately think of a famous chapter in Paul's first letter to the Corinthian Christians. Chapter 13, often referred to as the "love chapter," is one that has been read at countless weddings over the years because of its descriptions of love's characteristics. "Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. . . ." and so on and so forth. (1 Cor. 13:4-5a) This particular chapter is indeed a powerful one that describes not just the love that we have for one another (such as in a marriage relationship), but more deeply and profoundly of God's deep and abiding love.

As powerful as is this 13th chapter of 1 Corinthians, there is an even more powerful summary and testimony to God's love. And that is in chapter 4 of the book of 1 John. We read the 6 verses of this chapter that is the crux of all other scripture testifying to God's love.

This is the perfect place for us to begin our emphasis on learning God's love because we learn here that simply put, "God is love." (1 Jn. 4:8) One writer puts it this way, "That love is of God is the basic premise of Christian faith and theology." (D. Moody Smith, *First, Second, and Third John: Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, © 1991 John Knox Press, p. 106)

As we focus on this basic premise—love that is—it can be surprising how we in the Christian church have, along the way, made it more complicated than that. For example, somehow we got it in our heads that in order to live a Christian life there are all sorts of rules and regulations, dos and don'ts that must be followed. Christian living under this rubric became more an exercise in doing the right things and not doing the wrong things. And closely related to that is that to be a Christian is to believe and affirm the right beliefs and to reject and repudiate wrong beliefs.

Now surely there are implications for Christian living and understanding when we begin with this basic premise of God's love. The problem with rigid rules for living and rigid theological beliefs is that the love that is behind them can become so severely obscured that love is no longer the motivating premise and fear takes its place. Fear of wrong behavior can leave us shaking in our boots as can fear of wrong belief. Our motivation then comes not from the bright and shining love of God, but rather from the fear of tripping up and failing to live and believe correctly.

Well I don't know about you, but I think there is much too much emphasis on fear today that has drained us and famished us. Fear can be a powerful motivator in the short term. Kind of like the adrenalin that can flow into our muscles in a moment of crisis enabling us to physically do much more than we normally can—such as lifting a car off of a person who is trapped beneath it. But adrenalin is for a very temporary condition to get ourselves out of danger. Our bodies would never tolerate a sustained infusion of adrenalin without doing damage to our bodies.

So it is for us as Christians. We're called to be a positive contributor to the society and culture in which we live. It is for us as Christians then to redouble our emphasis on this foundational premise that God is the source of love, and that it is God's love that we have to share.

In this second decade of the 21st century, on a daily basis, we are hearing more about who we are in opposition to others than who we are in relation to one another. On a daily basis we are hearing more about who it is and what it is that we are to fear, more than we are hearing to whom it is we are to extend the love we have been given.

This is where we enter as God's people, God's loving people. Again, as we read in 1 John. "Everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love."

Lately we have been hearing a lot of comparisons of our situation today with that of the situation in our nation 50 years ago in the 1960s. I won't go into detail here on that today except to say that there arose at that time a desire to counter the fear and darkness that seemed to be growing in that time. As I was preparing this I couldn't get away from a song that kept popping up in the back of my mind. It's a song that you'll remember if you were around 50 years ago. If you weren't let me read the refrain with its simple and yet profound message.

What the world needs now is love, sweet love
It's the only thing that there's just too little of
What the world needs now is love, sweet love,
No not just for some but for everyone.

No, not just for some, oh, but just for everyone. (lyrics by Hal David)

These simple words packed a punch that led it to be one of the most popular songs of 1965, for it gave voice to a deep longing within.

In our own Presbyterian tradition, in the same decade of the 1960s, we added to our confessional standards a new document entitled simply, *The Confession of 1967*.

As I conclude this sermon, I invite you to help launch this new year of Learning and Living God's Love, Together, by reciting a paragraph from that confession. It's on the bulletin cover. Please stand, as you're able, and let's read it together.

God's sovereign love is a mystery beyond the reach of the human mind. Human thought ascribes to God superlatives of power, wisdom, and goodness. But God reveals divine love in Jesus Christ by showing power in the form of a servant, wisdom in the folly of the cross, and goodness in receiving sinful men and women. The power of God's love in Christ to transform the world discloses that the Redeemer is the Lord and Creator who made all things to serve the purpose of God's love. (from *The Confession of 1967*, alt.)