



First Congregational Church (UCC) of Ashfield
429 Main Street – Ashfield MA 01330
Creating Community, Welcoming All

Sermon May 2, 2021 “What is Love?” Rev. David Jones

As I was sitting with our scriptures this week at my desk in Shelburne Falls, I found myself also sitting back in Toronto, around a table in a small seminary classroom at Emmanuel College. And again it is for a course that involved the study of music. But this time it was about the history of church music, especially hymns. And there was an applied component: each seminary student was expected to write an original hymn. The lyrics would be submitted and paired with a suitable tune from the United Church of Canada’s hymnal, and finally taught to the class as if they were one’s congregation. I was nervous about this, but we were not only allowed but encouraged to invite more confident singers from within the class to help us in this task. No one—including the professor—was grading us on our singing or our technical skill as writers; the assignment was about having confidence in ourselves, in trusting others, and to experience holy music without fear of being judged or criticized. It ended up being a lot of fun. As it turns out, it was very good preparation for being called here to Ashfield, where we have so many gifted and dedicated singers, and true and very gracious professionals in Amy and Margery, to lead our congregation in singing. (As we look ahead to choir Sunday, I can’t help but say here how well loved our church is by Amy and Margery and our choir, including Octavia who has taken on the extra role of leading us in our hymns every Sunday—who have all gone above and beyond in these very trying times).

But I was transported back to seminary and to this particular memory and assignment, because I remember the professor being very clear about his expectations for our hymn lyrics. He told us all, before we could get any clever ideas, that we were not to simply write “God is love,” or “Jesus loves me.” Such words do make lovely hymns, but in seminary, for this class and this assignment, we needed our lyrics to “show our work.” Even if everything we believe does boil down to the idea that “God is love,” it was expected that we would give our professor and our classmates a little more detail.

Our reading from the first letter of John, like the Gospel of John, contains this famous and profound statement, that God is love. But like my hymn professor was wary of, to assert that God is love is to answer a question by posing another. What or who is God? Well, God is love. And if God is love, then a person is faithful, a person is righteous, only so far as they practice love, only so far as they embrace love and share love with one another. But this passage from the letter of John does not show its work any further than that. The answer to who or what God is, is love. But this answer only poses the next question: what *is* love?

That’s a big question. Thankfully, the first letter of John, despite not showing its work in full, does explain to us how we may yet come to answer it. In this passage, God, who is love, is said to live in us, meaning we each have a piece of God, we each have the grace or nature of God within our very bodies. We each have a ray or flame of God’s warm light. And so we each live and breathe along with God’s love that is already inside us, and we each have the immense privilege of giving life and breath to God’s love on earth the very same way God’s love once gave life and breath to us. What this means is that each one of us has a portion or a share of the answer to ‘what is love?’ already within us. This means that we can become authorities on love—if we pay close enough attention. To worship God well—to love God well—we should trust our deepest and most resilient selves. And we should trust this part of ourselves because God has trusted this part of us—God made it and even lives *in* it.

Now that is all still pretty vague. But the writer of this letter gives us a somewhat more precise thing to watch for, once we have this deep trust securely in place. When we are living according to the love of God, or when we have received this love from another, we will know because our fears begin to be cast out. The writer says there is no fear in love--I'm not as convinced of that. But the idea that fear is in retreat, that it gets crowded out and kept at bay in the presence of love, that rings true.

The presence of trust and an absence of fear--these are things that begin to tell us what love is, where to find it, how we will know if we are realizing it in our very midst here on earth.

God is love--but what is love? Since being here in Western Mass, I have seen love many times. I have seen it at gravesides at the Plain Cemetery, where cold and snow and even a rain storm has not shaken family and friends from celebrations of life. I especially remember when the families and many friends of Pete Roberts gathered last June, when what had been a pleasant and sunny day suddenly became a violent rain storm for the exact duration of the service. The sudden change in the weather caught a young minister unprepared, as my unprotected pages quickly became soaked through, making it difficult to turn them. And as I became embarrassed--which is a kind of fear--a member of the family quietly came forward to help. And the whole family met my eyes almost in unison and offered kind smiles. I realized I could trust them, that they were with me, that there was a larger purpose for our gathering than a perfect service, and anyway, Pete Roberts, who liked to get a rise out of people, was probably right then having a good laugh at my expense. The graveside at the Plain Cemetery is a place of love.

But what is love? Since being here I have seen love in Springfield. I remember one of my first patient visits was to a young man, probably about my age. I was asked by his nurse to stop by. She explained to me as I arrived and before I entered the room for my visit, that the young man had been scheduled for a relatively routine surgical procedure. When they had come to move him for surgery, he had something like a panic attack--he became anxious and urged staff to return him to his room. The staff now hoped a visit from a chaplain might help calm him so they could move ahead with the surgery. When I walked in, I confess I was surprised at who I found. It was this giant of a man, and he looked strong. It was not the man I was picturing as the nurse told me what had happened. Anyway, the patient and I talked easily for an hour and he explained to me all the worries he had in his life, problems with his family, fears about his job security. He worried about his son, who lived with his mother far away in North Carolina. He shared that he had been spending more and more time living out of his car, because his own mother had asked him to move out. He didn't think he was afraid of the surgery. Rather he was afraid of what might happen after. He was already barely getting by. He was already so vulnerable, living so precariously. And he was embarrassed that he was afraid. The nurse and I had the privilege of forming part of a team that could alleviate that feeling of embarrassment. Many of his worries were beyond what we could help with, but he gave me his trust and I gave him mine, and we genuinely met one another. It is not an exaggeration to say, I don't think, that I loved him at that moment. And that was just enough, in that moment, to get his acute fear under control, to push it back and fill in some of that negative space with positive trust in the hospital and in himself. Our hospitals here in Western Mass are places of love.

But what is love? I saw love in Jacksonville, Florida on the floor of the warehouse. I remember as I was studying up on union organizing, I asked my friend and mentor what happens when a co-worker and union member has a racist attitude toward another co-worker and union member. And I asked this because I knew from my studying that in American history there have been unions that have been leaders in fighting racism, and there have been unions with leadership that fomented racism. (We can say the same thing about churches). I knew the kind of union I was interested in serving, and I knew that my friend and mentor was making the same choice, but I was curious, just from a strategic and practical perspective, how a commitment to anti-racism impacts our day-to-day organizing. First, this mentor affirmed that our union should have a zero-tolerance policy with regard to racism in our ranks, and that that should be asserted at all times and never forgotten. It is paramount. But he explained that we also, at the same time, have a responsibility to our members and co-workers not to surrender even one worker to a backward idea or a bad attitude, that ultimately our success or failure in winning a better contract depended not just on *saying* we shouldn't be racist or prejudiced, but also on teaching our coworkers not to be. We wouldn't win the

fight against racism and therefore also the fight for a better contract, if we were doing management's work for them by writing off co-workers as deplorables. We are all branches on the same true vine of love, and we will all prosper according to the will of the vinegrower only when we all come to understand that these false divisions sowed among us, are harming and undermining us. This education, this daily, patient teaching can give new life to someone--it is growth by pruning. Our workplaces, even harsh ones, can be places of love.

Whatever we do and come to in this life on earth, God will always remain perfect love, living both within and beyond us. But as we *are* children of God, what we do and come to in this life on earth *will* determine whether God's perfect love is allowed to prosper or not, whether God will come to be the first thing we see all around us, wherever we look, or if God will be forced into retreat, glimpsed only deep beneath the surface of our communities. I don't think anyone would come to church or seek out a church community if they did not agree that it is important to love and care for one another. The trouble arises in deciding *how* we should love and care for one another. It is rarely that we doubt or argue that God is love--but what is love?

This first letter of John makes some big claims about God without necessarily showing us all of the work. But it does assure us that we each have every right to place our trust in ourselves, since God has already done so. God trusts us so much that God lives inside us. And the letter teaches us that, when standing in the presence of love, we will know that's where we're standing because we will feel our fears begin to fade. When families and friends in grief go out of their way to relieve a young minister of embarrassment; when a nurse recognizes a patient just needs someone to listen to them and to witness them; when a union mentor is prepared not just to sing his own praises but to do the daily, patient, and difficult work of challenging mis-education at work, fears are being overcome and love is being perfected.

Our passage from scripture doesn't show us all the work. But maybe there's a reason for that. Because as far as I can tell, it is up to all of us--in Ashfield, in Springfield, in our unions or our churches--it is up to *us* to show the work of love. Because love is God, and God *lives* in each of us.

Alleluia and amen.