

Psalm 22:25-31 (CEB)

I offer praise in the great congregation because of you; I will fulfill my promises in the presence of those who honor God. Let all those who are suffering eat and be full! Let all who seek the Lord praise him! I pray your hearts live forever! Every part of the earth will remember and come back to the Lord; every family among all the nations will worship you. Because the right to rule belongs to the Lord, he rules all nations. Indeed, all the earth's powerful will worship him; all who are descending to the dust will kneel before him; my being also lives for him. Future descendants will serve him; generations to come will be told about my Lord. They will proclaim God's righteousness to those not yet born, telling them what God has done.

1 John 4:7-21

Dear friends, let's love each other, because love is from God, and everyone who loves is born from God and knows God. The person who doesn't love does not know God, because God is love. This is how the love of God is revealed to us: God has sent his only Son into the world so that we can live through him. This is love: it is not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son as the sacrifice that deals with our sins.

Dear friends, if God loved us this way, we also ought to love each other. No one has ever seen God. If we love each other, God remains in us and his love is made perfect in us. This is how we know we remain in him and he remains in us, because he has given us a measure of his Spirit. We have seen and testify that the Father has sent the Son to be the savior of the world. If any of us confess that Jesus is God's Son, God remains in us and we remain in God. We have known and have believed the love that God has for us.

God is love, and those who remain in love remain in God and God remains in them. This is how love has been perfected in us, so that we can have confidence on the Judgment Day, because we are exactly the same as God is in this world. There is no fear in love, but perfect love drives out fear, because fear expects punishment. The person who is afraid has not been made perfect in love. We love because God first loved us. Those who say, "I love God" and hate their brothers or sisters are liars. After all, those who don't love their brothers or sisters whom they have seen can hardly love God whom they have not seen! This commandment we have from him: Those who claim to love God ought to love their brother and sister also.

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One of my earliest memories of church is from about the second grade. My dad, brother, and I, along with my dad's girlfriend, who would become his wife within the year, went to a large Baptist church near our house, and we went a lot. The church had Wednesday night services, which we went to each week, and I remember those services much more than any Sunday service, which we also went to every week, mostly because I spent many of those nights playing with my friends – for a long time I had a scar running the length of my leg from getting a little too into a game of tag one night. But the occasion I hold onto as one of those early, formative memories of church doesn't come from a time I was playing outside, it's from a night I stayed inside for Bible study; maybe the weather was bad and I couldn't go outside to play, I don't know. I don't remember anything about the study or what was being presented, but I do remember that the pastor asked a general question to all those gathered, something to the effect of, "what/who is God," and I immediately raised my hand with an answer. Now, it's at this point

that my memory of what really happened is probably skewed by the emotional reaction I had to the actual event; memory isn't a reliable witness. When telling this story, I tend to project from those emotions and make assumptions about what the pastor was thinking, and I can't honestly say that he meant to demean me or what I said, even though it sure felt like he did, so before I disparage him, I feel like I need to make that admission. So, the question was asked, and I raised my hand and was called on. I imagine the pastor thought it'd be cute to hear what one of the kids had to say, I know I would think the same thing today, and I answered, "God is love." It's a perfectly acceptable answer, especially for a second grader without any real theological training to speak of, and it comes directly from our reading from 1 John. Maybe he was asking a rhetorical question and I was just so eager to say something that he had to call on me when the situation didn't really need an answer. I've also thought that perhaps his reaction to the answer I gave was because he had just read 1 John 4 and I parroted what I'd heard, but I doubt it, because when I gave my proclamation that God is love, he chuckled in a sort of mocking way and said, "yeah, I guess he does love us," and then, without another word, he moved on. I was totally deflated. I had paid attention, I participated, and I gave what I thought was a good, intelligent answer, and in return I was spoken down to and dismissed. When I think about the incident today, what makes me angriest isn't the way the pastor spoke down to me or the hurt that I still sort of feel. I'm not angry about those things because I realize I may be misremembering some aspects of it – maybe it really was a rhetorical question and he was just eager to get back to the point. But I am angry about the "I guess" in his response, something I'm entirely sure he did say. What did he mean that "he guessed" that God is love? Is it not the main point of scripture that God loves us? From beginning to end we hear that we were created in love, that when we disobeyed, God went out of God's way to correct our behavior when God could have more easily just started all over, and God loved us so much that God was willing to do anything for us, including taking on the cross and death itself? What kind of answer is "I guess?" I was a child, eager to engage in my faith and I was dismissed as easily as one might dismiss an unwanted sales call, and not only was I dismissed, but so was the entire point of our faith. There is no "I guess" about God's love. God's love is as sure as night follows day; you can count on it.

I feel the need to underscore God being love not just because I'm a person of faith, but also because I'm clergy. My role in the church makes it especially important for me to remind all of us of this fact because God's love is sorely missing, missing not just from the world, but from the church. Too many churches have become bastions not of love, but of hate. But what is the truth we have heard from scripture? Again and again we are taught that God is love, and since God is love, we ought to love others. To be clear on what this love is that we're talking about, love, as I defined last week, is selfless action for the good of others. To not love those around us, especially those in need, is to refuse knowledge of and act against God. That's not my perspective, that's literally what we are taught in scripture. It is by offering love to one another that we can be assured that God's love, the very same love that we celebrate as offering us salvation, remains in us. Love is a big deal for our faith and we do harm to ourselves, to the world around us, and to God, by refusing to buy into this notion of love. The goal of our love is its perfection, because perfect love casts out fear and fear is what locks us in inaction, fear is what causes the seeds of hatred to take root in our hearts, fear is what divides. The perfection of our love will drive out fear from our lives altogether, enabling us to fully give ourselves to our God, who is love. I realize that the call to perfect anything brings with it anxiety – we don't even say "practice makes perfect" around our house because we don't want Walt and Corey to think we expect perfection, instead we say "practice makes better." But love is something that can be perfected, and it's not as impossible as it sounds. It's incredibly easy, actually, 1 John 4:12 says "If we love each other, God remains in us and his love is made perfect in us." All it takes for our love to be made perfect is to love one another. That's it. That's all it takes because God is love, and acting through God and God's desires will always be perfect even when we aren't.

It might be hard to wrap your head around an action so simple being called perfect, so I'll help explain. The letters of John have a bit of an unknown history, but we know one important thing about them and the community to which they were written – they were written to a community being severely persecuted. I don't mean that people were protesting outside of their homes and businesses, that they faced a constant stream of petty lawsuits, or that people spread rumors about them, I mean that their very lives were put at risk every single day. They never knew if they'd end each day with their families, or if they'd be beaten within an inch of their lives and thrown in prison, or if they'd be executed. And they chose to fight against all they experienced, not with violence or hatred, but with love. They offered love to one another in their common suffering so that they could overcome the weight of their suffering. But they didn't just love each other. They offered love even to those that persecuted them, showing those that sought to harm them that they were unafraid. Being unafraid did two things – it offered living proof of their belief that no matter what they were secure in the arms of God forever and it took power away from their persecutors. Those persecutors took the community's fearlessness as a challenge to find novel ways to torture them, but the community of John kept their attitude of love, and it was that love that won the day. Their persecution didn't last forever, but the witness of their love has. Those persecutors ended up becoming their brothers and sisters, as their love kept winning over hearts and lives. Choosing the simple act of love and making that choice in all things, where it is easy and especially where it is difficult, is perfection.

I read a book recently in which it was said that if you want to know what someone believes, don't listen to what they say, watch what they do. The book wasn't on moral philosophy, it was one in a series of fantasy novels; you really can find good stuff just about anywhere, and that series had a lot of really good theology, even if it wasn't meant to be theological. The thought itself is obviously not original to that book, many have said variations of the same for eternity. But the important thing isn't where the quote comes from, it's the truth of the statement. We're awfully good at lying, we'll say just about anything to get what we want, but our actions never lie. A person who believes in hate will practice hate, even if they proclaim to love. Understanding this is deeply important because we are at risk of being taken advantage of, as words have tremendous power over us. We'll buy into someone's rhetoric if it supports something we want, even when it should be clear that it's all a scam. Snake oil salesmen still exist in many forms because of our willingness to believe empty words, if those empty words promise to give us our deepest desires. We want to lose weight, so we believe that there's a magic pill that just melts away belly fat, and I'm not talking about something like Ozempic. We want safety, so we believe the politician that says that they alone can bring us safety. We want wealth, so we believe that there's an easy path to riches. We want an easy solution, and so we believe it's possible. But the only path to what we really want is in love. So, we should look to the actions of the person before deciding whether or not we can trust them; their actions tell us the truth of who they are and what they really believe. Good people can certainly make mistakes and act against their beliefs, we've all done it, but mistakes don't define a person. We learn from our mistakes and move toward the ideals we proclaim. And if love is that ideal, that's what we need to not just profess, but do. All it takes for us to perfect love is to do it. Choosing love will show the world that we believe in love's power, and our belief in love's power will transform our lives and our world.

Let no one deceive you – God is love. We know God when we love. So, know God, choose to love, and let your love be made perfect. Thanks be to God for the gift of love, which binds us with our Creator and allows God to live in us. Amen.