

FEAR OR LOVE?
I John 4:7-9, 18-21

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(online worship only)

On Thursday of last week, I met online with the clergy support group I convene. We meet once a month. We check in with each other. If anyone in the group is having any particular problems or questions, we spend time listening to that person and offering support. Sometimes we have read a book and discussed it together. This past week, one of the group members led us in a mini-seminar on the Enneagram and how our Enneagram type affects our ministries.

If you're not familiar with the Enneagram, it is a way of understanding one's personality and one's orientation to the world which has many spiritual applications. The Enneagram identifies nine basic types of people. When you identify which type you are, you can begin to understand yourself more deeply and grow in a way that brings out your individual strengths. You also learn to be more empathetic with other people, as you understand how differently we are wired. Our women's retreat group studied the Enneagram together one year, and we have done the Enneagram together as a church staff, so that we can better understand each other's different personalities and work better together.

In my session on Thursday, my colleague Andrew, who is an advanced student of the Enneagram, talked about one particular feature. Each of the nine personality types has a particular kind of childhood wound. We all picked up some hurtful messages as children, not usually because our parents or other relatives were trying to

be cruel - these are just messages that somehow stick to us and shape us. Every one of us — even those of us whose childhoods were happy and healthy — we each have this wound.

It might be a message that said, “You will only be loved if you’re doing your best” or “You will only be loved if you’re constantly giving to other people” or “There’s something not quite right with you - you need to change or pretend to be different.” I won’t go into all of them this morning; that’s not the point.

As Andrew was talking to us on Thursday, I was watching the faces of my colleagues. We all grew quiet, and one by one, as Andrew described our particular types, each with its wound. I saw recognition come across each face, one by one. One woman even said out loud, “Yes, that’s me!”

Then we went on to talk about how these childhood wounds affect our faith, how our faith can help heal our wounds, and Andrew said, “There is one thing every single personality type has in common. We all want to be reminded that we are loved.”

Do you know anyone who doesn’t **NEED** to be reminded that he is loved? That she is valued? That they are made in the image of the God who loves them unconditionally?

This is at the core of our faith. Our passage from I John says it plainly. God is the source AND the definition of love. God IS love. And not love in the abstract.

We see God’s love at work in the stories of the Bible - when God gives the people of Israel a homeland and laws so that they will know how to live in harmony and justice, all people cared for, all creation cared for.

We see God's love at work in the person of Jesus who showed us by example what it means to love ALL people, including one's political enemies, including the outcasts and the forgotten, the oppressed and the despised.

We are God's beloved. God wants nothing more than for us to live up to our potential, healthy and whole, passionately pouring our God-given talents into the world.

Do you know anyone who doesn't need to be reminded of this good news which is at the heart of the Christian gospel? Isn't it where we can find the healing salve for every wound?

I believe it is. I believe that if every person were able to embrace that truth, to deeply believe that they are loved and accepted, that there would be fewer acts of violent aggression, fewer incidents of abuse and cruelty. I believe that the message of God's unconditional love is transformative and life-changing, and if human lives are changed, then our whole world changes. It is why I believe that the church matters, because there are few other places where this message is shared and proclaimed.

But I John also reminds us of what we know to be true. Not everyone acts out of love. And what is the opposite of love? John does not identify it as hate. John names it as **FEAR**. Fear is the opposite of love. Fear will rob you of love. You cannot both fear someone and love them at the same time.

We know what happens when people act out of fear. Fear generates more fear. Fear stokes anger, which then stokes more fear. One writer who has studied fear concludes that the more fearful a person becomes, the more they reject any compassionate response to the world's problems. Instead, they lash out, and they become narcissistic. Fear eventually drives out all thoughts of other people.

The Bible tells us again and again and again, “Do not be afraid.” “Fear not.”

Let’s be real. There’s a lot to be afraid of in our world right now. The coronavirus. The devastation caused by fires and hurricanes and other natural disasters. Fear of those who are different than we are, fear that life will never go back to the normal we enjoyed just seven months ago. Fear of cancer, fear of dementia. Fear of crime and financial insecurity.

What do we do when we feel afraid, yet we don’t want that fear to motivate or control our actions? The writer Elizabeth Gilbert uses the analogy of driving a car. She says, “I don’t know how to keep fear out of the car; it always manages to get in. But I absolutely refuse to let it into the front seat. It will not be allowed anywhere near the steering wheel or the gas pedal. I haven’t figured out how to get rid of fear altogether, but it doesn’t drive the car. It stays in the back seat.”

We learn how to be courageous and loving **in spite of** fear. We can’t control whether or not we’re going to be visited by fear, but we **CAN** decide whether we’re going to invite fear in and let it live in our hearts and control what we do.

Every day we get up and make the choice, “Will I act out of fear today or will I act out of love today?” We can’t do both.

Fear motivates us to divide, to see one another as adversaries. Love motivates us to develop radical empathy, to draw close to one another and listen to one another’s stories.

You may think that love seems too simple a response, childish even when we see the enormity of the world’s problems right now. You may say that it’s naive to even try.

When I was in Israel, a place still called the Holy Land, I felt very little connection to some of the places where tourists flock. There is a church built over the place where it is believed that Jesus died - the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. Our group stood in line and walked into the little room that is said to be the exact location of Jesus' tomb. The church is divided into sections, each one managed by a different competing branch of Christianity. I know this is a sacred place for many people, but it wasn't to me.

But when I was on the shores of the sea of Galilee and when I was in the place where the Dead Sea Scrolls were found - two places where we know Jesus spent time - I felt a spiritual connection that was unexpected. I felt drawn once again to the person of Jesus, this person who channeled God's unconditional love as no one has before or since. This Jesus embraced Samaritans and women. He looked into the eyes of people afflicted with leprosy and mental illness. His love healed the wounds of children and tax collectors. **He chose to live in love.**

We are people who bear his name. What we do matters. Every person matters. Our actions have a ripple effect on the people around us. When we choose to live in love, to reject the motivation of fear, we impact the world.

And even if you don't believe that, let me leave you with this. How do you want to spend your one precious life? Do you want to spend it cowering in fear, removing yourself further and further from all sources of life and love, or do you want to spend it drawing closer to other people in compassion? Which kind of energy do you want to cultivate? The energy of fear or the energy of love? This video encourages us to take one more step in the direction of love.