

## Community: It Starts Here, with Love

1 John 4:7-20

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When you hear the word “fellowship” what comes to mind? Well, as a lifer in the local church, there are at least a few things that pop into my head when I think about the word fellowship. The first is a place, the fellowship hall. A place filled with coffee, donut holes, potlucks, and bake sales. The second thing that I think of is every invitation I received from my youth group growing up. It would always have that tagline, “Come for the fun, food and fellowship.” I understood the food part because I was always hungry, but the fellowship part I wasn’t so clear on. The last thing that I think of when I hear fellowship is a group I was part of in high school and college called Fellowship of Christian Athletes. Maybe you did that one too. We were a group of guys and gals who would get together and do Bible study once a month, play a game, and then we would promise to be good sports when we competed.

Our reading for today comes from a letter that the apostle John wrote to a second or third generation church plant about what they were supposed to be as a fellowship. And he has some specific ideas about what it meant to be a fellowship in the first century and forever. First and foremost, of all the things he believed that the fellowship of people that followed Jesus was supposed to be a “holy” fellowship. What do you think it means to be holy? Do pastors in their colorful preaching clothes come to mind? Do images of big church steeples or rule followers or God pop up in your imagination?

Well, for John and the other writers of the new testament, when they heard the word holy, what registered for them was to be “set apart.” But, not just set apart from, they were to be set apart for. They would have remembered the way that God called Abraham in Genesis to be a blessing for the world. They would have remembered Jesus’ words to be salt and light, for the purpose of revealing God’s love for the world. John puts it like this in 1 John 4:11-12: “Beloved, since God loves us so much, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love

one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.”

Let’s put that together now: We are a holy fellowship that reveals God to the world. How do we do that? The text here says we do it in the way we LOVE. But is it just any love? Will any kind of love do? Not according to John. Just before our passage today, John has a word about “testing the spirits.” Here’s what he says in verses 1-6.

*<sup>1</sup> Dear friends, do not believe everyone who claims to speak by the Spirit. You must test them to see if the spirit they have comes from God. For there are many false prophets in the world. <sup>2</sup> This is how we know if they have the Spirit of God: If a person claiming to be a prophet acknowledges that Jesus Christ came in a real body, that person has the Spirit of God. <sup>3</sup> But if someone claims to be a prophet and does not acknowledge the truth about Jesus, that person is not from God. Such a person has the spirit of the Antichrist, which you heard is coming into the world and indeed is already here. <sup>4</sup> But you belong to God, my dear children. You have already won a victory over those people, because the Spirit who lives in you is greater than the spirit who lives in the world. <sup>5</sup> Those people belong to this world, so they speak from the world’s viewpoint, and the world listens to them. <sup>6</sup> But we belong to God, and those who know God listen to us. If they do not belong to God, they do not listen to us. That is how we know if someone has the Spirit of truth or the spirit of deception.*

For John, there are a lot of other options, spirits, anti-Christ’s out there that have a lot of ideas about how to love. To John, it is critical that we maintain contact with the love that Jesus demonstrated so that we are able to continue to be the Jesus-centered, holy fellowship that reveals God that we were created to be. So, we are to love like Jesus. Well, then how did Jesus love? For that we’ll need to get our heads into this passage from 1 John, chapter 4, as well as what John recorded as he was following Jesus during his earthly ministry. So let’s read our passage for today, which comes from 1 John 4:7-20.

*<sup>7</sup> Dear friends, let us continue to love one another, for love comes from God. Anyone who loves is a child of God and knows God. <sup>8</sup> But anyone who does not love does not know God, for God is love. <sup>9</sup> God showed how much he loved us by sending his one and only Son into the world so that we might have eternal life through him. <sup>10</sup> This is real love—not that we loved God, but*

*that he loved us and sent his Son as a sacrifice to take away our sins.<sup>11</sup> Dear friends, since God loved us that much, we surely ought to love each other.<sup>12</sup> No one has ever seen God. But if we love each other, God lives in us, and his love is brought to full expression in us.<sup>13</sup> And God has given us his Spirit as proof that we live in him and he in us.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, we have seen with our own eyes and now testify that the Father sent his Son to be the Savior of the world.<sup>15</sup> All who declare that Jesus is the Son of God have God living in them, and they live in God.<sup>16</sup> We know how much God loves us, and we have put our trust in his love. God is love, and all who live in love live in God, and God lives in them.<sup>17</sup> And as we live in God, our love grows more perfect. So we will not be afraid on the day of judgment, but we can face him with confidence because we live like Jesus here in this world.<sup>18</sup> Such love has no fear, because perfect love expels all fear. If we are afraid, it is for fear of punishment, and this shows that we have not fully experienced his perfect love.<sup>19</sup> We love each other because he loved us first.<sup>20</sup> If someone says, "I love God," but hates a fellow believer, that person is a liar; for if we don't love people we can see, how can we love God, whom we cannot see?*

Now, the love of Jesus that we are going to explore today comes in three parts. The first way that we need to understand Jesus' love is that it's preemptive. The first chapter of John's Gospel about Jesus is very different from what Matthew, Mark, and Luke had to say about Jesus. While those three were trying to establish that Jesus stood in the line of David and was the long-promised Messiah, John was telling a cosmic story about Jesus that included ALL of creation. John's first chapter puts Jesus' actions squarely in the creation story with God and the Holy Spirit. When we fast forward to John's letter here, he echoes what he says later in his Gospel about Jesus' action in the world, almost verbatim. In verse 9 he says this, *"God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him."* What does that sound like from the Gospel? None other than John 3:16, *"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son."* Now, what happens to how we understand this phrase, or these two phrases, when we add to it the reality that Jesus partners with God in creation? We get a creation that was created by love, in love. God's love pre-dates, preempts everything. Especially anything we can do—which is where God's love and the world's love differ.

The way the world loves is often predicated on the question, "What have you done for me lately?" That

is, it is earned. You must do something in order for you to earn love and often what's worse is that if you don't continue to maintain what you have earned, it can be taken away.

Not with God, though. The love of God has existed since before time and will exist according to Revelation long after. So what does that look like in our holy fellowship? One concrete story from my life that comes to mind is from an unlikely place: prison. Maybe it isn't all that unlikely, a lot of the New Testament was written by people under arrest. Three years ago I was in Clinical Pastoral Education as part of my seminary education, and part of my learning was to observe a reconciliation class in a prison just north of the Twin Cities for about 8 weeks. Though the stories of how people got into prison were different, some of them stole things, some used or sold drugs, some committed murdered, all of them, at some level, felt as though they had to earn back the love of God. By all accounts, I can see why they thought that given how the world often works around love. After all, they were there to "pay their debt to society." There was a practice of greeting each other that we used every day. We would make two fists, fist bump, and say this to another person, "I see you, I hear you, and you are loved." It was awkward and a little unnerving to begin with, but I'll tell you what, watching that sink into these men over the course of that fall, and into us, was nothing short of a miracle. Watching them have a sense that before anything they do, they are seen, heard, and loved was something special. What would it look like if our church was that kind of community? A community that was built on this preemptive, foundational belief that we are loved before anything that we do. I think that it would just change everything. We would have a strong foundation on which to begin to think about how our community looks in the world.

The second type of Jesus love is inclusive. How many of you like to dance? Like really dance with a partner? What does it take to dance with them well? In that situation someone often leads, but does that mean the person following isn't engaged? Of course not, they are responsive and active participants. Additionally, is it possible, regardless of your role, to be disengaged? No! That's when you step on someone's toes. One of the most beautiful images of the life of God — Father, Son, Holy Spirit—is a divine dance where the Trinity interact distinctly, yet as one. In loving us, God invites us into this divine dance. God includes us: our whole being, all of us in this dynamic, flowing, relationship. I think it is a type of inclusion that is much, much greater than the mere toleration of the world.

What does it look like to be a holy fellowship that loves through inclusion? Just over 11 years ago, Prince of Peace decided to adopt the social statement of our denomination, the ELCA, which affirmed LGBTQ persons as full participants in the life and leadership of the church. Lots of people said then, and still in some places say now, that LGBTQ persons were always welcome! Yeah, to a point, so long as they see the light, act like a straight person, and change. Until which point they would be blocked from certain elements of our fellowship's life together; things like communion, leadership, being a pastor, and marriage, to name a few. In committing to the social statement as a congregation, we committed to the dance with these people. A dance where two equal partners are involved in the movement together. And no, this isn't a choose your own adventure dance. This is a dance that's patterned after the life and ministry of Jesus. It is a dance of Jesus' generosity, self giving in love. So I wonder for you and for all of us today, how might we include the people we have only been tolerating? How might we truly include the people with different political persuasions? How might we truly include the people we disagree with? How might we truly include the immigrants from Afghanistan who are trying to find a new place to live? How might we truly include the people who use our Mission Outpost? How can we transcend the mere toleration of the world to love like Jesus in the way that we include people in this divine dance as a holy fellowship.

The third characteristic of Jesus' love to model is the way it is incarnational. One of the main issues at stake for John in this letter is that Jesus is fully God and fully human. This community, quite a few years removed from Jesus' ministry and having not met Jesus in person, was already being influenced by other traditions of thought. The main one in this letter being Gnosticism, which was a Greek philosophical tradition that explained Jesus as being just a person in whom God's spirit resided until just before his crucifixion, at which point it bailed. So, for them, Jesus was a man and Christ was the divine part.

Throughout this letter, John takes this point of view to task. Again and again emphasizing that in Jesus what we had was the fullness of God and the fullness of humanity in one being. For John, God had actual skin in the game. For John, God REALLY knows what it is to be human. For John, if you were to experience Jesus in the flesh, you would be getting an up-close and personal encounter with God. You can't separate Jesus and Christ, but that is exactly what the Gnostics wanted to do.

I don't think that the Gnosticism of the first century is that big of a deal in the 21st century holy fellowship, what we're trying to create here. But I do think that there is a tendency of modern day holy fellowships that we must be aware of for us to really be who God has created us to be. And that is as the way that a church can be in the community, but not be part of the community. It is in the way that churches can advertise their love simply for the purpose of attracting people without being in the community, loving the people in person.

Prince of Peace, the organization, exists in Burnsville, MN and at our web address online. Prince of Peace, the holy fellowship, exists all over the country, and now all over the world, in each of you. We are where you are, but can people see that in your actions? That is the question. Do your Facebook posts come with action? Does your devotional life have any devotion to people? Jesus' love is incarnational, that is, in the flesh. How are you loving in that way? The love of the world is often just advertising. It is jumping on the bandwagon of this or that issue, hoping that by doing so people will see that you've done it and then come to you so they can consume what you've got. Jesus' incarnational love goes further than that. But if we are to reveal the love of God to the world around us, we will have to love as deeply as Jesus did.

So, Jesus' love, and therefore the love of this holy fellowship, is supposed to be these three things: preemptive, inclusive, and incarnational. Now what? What if we don't? Well, let me take you back to the beginning of this message in verses 9-11, *"God's love is revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. God lives in us."* Friends, the reason we need to love like Jesus is because it is when we love like Jesus that people see who God is. We are billboards pointing to someone. We are, in the way we love, showing people the God that loves them preemptively, inclusively, and incarnationally. That is how we are a holy fellowship. And the time to start being who we are called to be is now.

How are you loving like Jesus today?