

1 John 4:7-21

John 15:1-8

In case you were wondering, the words *love*, *loved*, and *beloved* are used twenty-eight times in our epistle reading today. For the sake of comparison, 1 Corinthians 13, the “love” chapter, uses the word eight times. Even if you include the use of the pronoun “it” as being used in place of the word itself, that only brings you up to sixteen uses. Twenty-eight times. It almost gets to the point where the sheer repetition causes it to lose its meaning, which would be awful. Because it is all about the love.

I can well remember a sermon given in chapel during seminary where the preacher was actually upset that so many student sermons were “all about the love.” There was not enough talk about wrath and judgment for this person's tastes. They should have gone to a Southern Baptist revival service. They would have gotten their fill. As I did growing up. The way I see it, our relationship with God – especially a God described as being “love” – should not be based on fear, but on acceptance.

One way I have heard God's love explained away is for folks to say that God's wrath is how God's love looks to sinners. Or as one friend put it, “The floggings will continue until morale improves.” Fear is a powerful motivator, but it is a tool of the dark side. While sin is an ever present reality, so is God's love. And of the two, love is the more powerful.

It was love that caused God to create us in the first place. Creation exists because of the over-abundance of God's love. And that creation is redeemed by God's infinite love for us. “For God so loved the world that he gave his only-begotten Son.” Or in the words of Bono from U2, “I was there when they crucified my Lord; I held the scabbard when the soldier drew his sword; I threw the dice when they pierced his side; But I've seen love conquer the great divide.” Love conquers all.

Our lives are to be a response to the experience of God's love for us. We don't follow our Lord's commands out of fear, but out of love. “Beloved, let us love one another because love is of God.” Since God loves us, we ought to love one another. It is that simple. And that difficult. Because love does not come naturally. All too often, our first instinct is not to love, but to ridicule belittle, dehumanize, find fault, gossip, try to feel superior. These are not love.

If we mock others and put them down so that we feel better about ourselves, we do not love. If we seek vengeance on those who have wronged us, we do not love. If we want our enemies destroyed, we do not love. If we react out of fear, we do not love. “There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love.” It is not for us to seek to punish, but to restore.

Oh that's just naïve, bleeding-heart, liberal nonsense. Maybe. But it is what our Lord commanded. Love your enemies; pray for those who persecute you. Turn the other cheek. If

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someone forces you to go one mile, go two. Feed the hungry; clothe the naked; care for the sick; visit the prisoner. Love one another. Love, love, love. It seems to go against everything our modern culture would have us believe. Love? You must be mad. Get what you can while you can and hold on to it with both hands until the bitter end. That is what the world teaches us. But our Lord teaches us to love. To abide in him. To bear fruit as members of the true vine. When we cut ourselves off from God's love by not loving others, we wither and die. We are made to be in community with one another and with our God. Our God calls to us constantly, come to me. Abide in me. Find my rest. Put away the demands of the world and seek my way, the way of love. Feel-good nonsense? So be it. But it is what our Lord commands.

As we go through our daily life, we make choices. When we choose what to do, what to say, what to post on Facebook, what to share on Twitter, what to talk about over coffee, we must think first, does this show love? Does this bear good fruit? Does this build up or tear down? Does this glorify God or just make us feel better? Does what we choose, in the words of St. Paul to the Galatians, promote “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control”? Or does it give rise to darker things? Things like “enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy”? What are the fruits of what we chose to do?

Maybe I'm wrong. Maybe I'm soft on sin. Maybe I love too much, trust too much, care too much. Maybe the world is right and we should just look after ourselves and let others get what they deserve. Maybe we are called to hand out vengeance and retribution. Maybe. But if I am going to be wrong, I am going to err on the side of love. I've had people try to scare the Hell out of me. I'd rather love the Heaven into them. After all, that is what our Savior taught us to do. In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. *Amen.*