

Sermon for Christ Church, Spotsylvania, VA
Fifth Sunday of Easter, Year B, April 29, 2018
The Rev. Bill Queen, "God Is Love"
Psalm 22:24-30, 1 John 4:7-21

our Epistle reading today conveys one of the most basic and true statements about God, yet one that is often misunderstood and misconstrued; John's 1st letter says "God is love," not once, but twice; and that phrase does not appear anywhere else in the Bible, although the Bible does talk a lot, throughout, about God's love

the first misunderstanding about this simple phrase is to assume that since "God is love" then it follows that 'love is God;' it is only true in mathematics that if $A=B$ then $B=A$; outside of math, it is a logical fallacy; "God is love" means that love is God's defining characteristic, but it does not mean that love is all that God is; and certainly when we see how the word 'love' itself gets used and misused in common parlance, it doesn't mean that everything construed as 'love' is of God; our God of love can judge, but God judges out of love; our God of love can be angry, but God is angry out of love; our God of love can act and feel and desire all kinds of things, but always subsumed under God's attitude of love towards us

the second misunderstanding about this simple phrase is to assume that since God loves us, all we have to do is love God in return; while certainly God does want our love in return, that's not all that's expected of us; one way we do return God's love is through prayer, and praise, and worship; notice how so many of the Psalms are, essentially, love poems to God; in today's reading the Psalmist says (v 29) "My soul shall live for him"—a statement of loving devotion; and so many of our hymns are, essentially, love songs to God; in Hymn 487 (we will sing at 10:30/we just sang) says in verse 3: "Come, my joy, my love, my heart: such a joy as none can move; such a love as none can part; such a heart as joys in love"

and worship is not the only way to return God's love; the primary way to do that, according to our 1st John passage again, is by directing some of the love we have received from God outward to other people; the epistle reminds us, in its final verse, that loving others is the commandment we have from Jesus himself, that "those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also;"

and I shouldn't have to remind you that Jesus was not talking about our siblings, but about his siblings—and as Son of God his siblings are every child of God, all people, everyone, since everyone is created in the image and likeness of God

the final misunderstanding about this simple phrase is to assume that this 'love' we are talking about is only an emotion, a feeling, or a matter of the heart; people have at times come to me in distress when they perceived that they didn't have, what they thought they should have, a warm and fuzzy affectionate feeling about God; I tell them not to worry, because when the Bible talks about love it is almost always talking about actions of love, not feelings of love

think about the wedding vows that a couple make to each other; they promise to love each other until death; but no one can promise to have feelings, that's not something any of us has control over; you all know that even in the best of relationships there are times that feeling wax and wane; the vow of love in marriage is to do certain things and to refrain from doing certain things, no matter how you may be feeling on any particular day; you can promise actions; that's the love that is promised in marriage vows

look at how the 1st John passage demonstrates this very same thing; how did God show his love for humanity?; by sending "his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins;" an action, not a feeling; so when we hear Jesus' command to love others, that does not mean we have to feel a certain way about them, nor does it even mean that we particularly have to like them, but it does mean that we have to treat them according to God's ways; namely, "to respect the dignity of every human being," as we promised at our baptism, and re-promise in repeating our Baptismal Covenant every time there is a baptism in the church

there is one other phrase that is repeated twice in the 1st John reading today that we have to be careful about; John says, "if we love one another ... [God's] love is perfected in us," and also "love has been perfected among us;" these phrases do not mean to make perfect, in the sense of having no fault, or limit, or error; there is no way that you and I can make God's love perfect

recall your English grammar and the difference between a present tense and a perfect tense; the present tense is "I am reading the book of Acts;" the perfect

tense is “I have read the book of Acts,” meaning I have completed reading some or all of it; the perfect tense means a completed action, and the translator would have been more true to our everyday usage, and understanding, by using instead: “if we love one another ... [God’s] love is completed in us,” and “love has been completed among us;” when we live out the kind of love that God has given us, then God’s love has been carried through to its completion; when we live out the kind of love that God has given us, then God’s love has accomplished what God set out for it to do; when we live out the kind of love that God has given us, then God’s love has reached the goal and purpose God intended

take your scripture insert home with you and re-read this passage from 1st John; pray through it; open your mind, and heart, and life to it; it is an amazing statement about what God has done for us and about what God expects from us in return; it is an amazing statement about the loving partnership into which God has invited us; it is an amazing statement about how God desires us to carry out his loving work of actions in the world