

Vanderbilt Presbyterian Church

Sermon

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Vanderbilt Presbyterian Church
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Perfect Love Casts Out Fear

1 John 4:7-21 • *Mothers' Day*

Oskar Schindler loved the Jewish people he rescued from the Nazis. Yet, in some strange way, he didn't really love them. Not at least in the way we usually think of love. He was possibly as anti-Semitic as many of the people of his day. It's just that deep within he knew that what was happening to the Jews was wrong. So he took action. Creatively, with great determination, he protected those he saved from the destroyer. He risked his life, and the lives of everyone around him, to rescue people he hardly knew. That's the way God loves us. That's what love is!

Love isn't a feeling of attraction. That's probably one of today's most popular misunderstandings. True love goes well beyond feelings of attraction. Feelings didn't sustain Oskar Schindler or the people he rescued. And to be quite blunt on this mother's day, feelings don't sustain a mother's love for her children, either. How else can we explain mothers standing by their child even when the child has done something quite awful? No, love is much more than a feeling of attraction, of liking or caring about another person.

To borrow a contemporary phrase, love is an attitude. It goes well beyond feelings. Pouring one's self out for another. That's love. Christ dying on the cross: that's the foremost biblical image of love. Love involves pouring out our lives for others. Communion is a potent symbol. Pouring out the pitcher of wine, emptying it, symbolizes Christ emptying himself, pouring himself into a human body. In Philippians Paul says quite literally, Christ poured himself out of himself. That's love. Love's a way of life, a self emptying way of life, laying down one's life for another.

If we are willing to love that way, we're going to risk pain and rejection. Truth be told, when we love others that way we may even be afraid. Vulnerability is frightening. We like to be safe, secure. But love risks insecurity. It opens us up to pain and suffering that we long ago locked away beneath layers of indifference. "To love another, as you love a child," Frederick Buechner wrote, "is to become vulnerable in a whole new way. It is no longer only through what happens to yourself that the world can hurt you but through what happens to the one you love also and greatly more hurtingly."¹ Feelings are too fickle to confuse with love. Feelings are too fragile to withstand the test of time. Love is commitment even when the feelings aren't there. It's an attitude, not of superiority or arrogance, not of anger or pettiness, but of determined caring and commitment to another's well-being.

Love doesn't come easy. Contrary to popular opinion, true love doesn't just happen. It isn't natural or automatic. We don't just fall into it. Natural love, the kind we're so familiar with, shows up as love of those who are like us. God's love shows up as concerned action toward those in need without regard to their being like us. Christ calls us even to love our enemies, which is certainly something other than liking them. The Old Testament is full of claims about God's deep concern for the poor and vulnerable. Psalm 146 proclaims: "The Lord sets the prisoners free; the Lord opens the eyes of the blind. The Lord lifts up those who are bowed down; the Lord loves the righteous. The Lord watches

over the strangers; [the Lord] upholds the orphan and the widow, but the way of the wicked [the Lord] brings to ruin.”¹

And who are the wicked whose way God brings to ruin? They are people just like us. Only they have forgotten or chosen to ignore God’s call to love their neighbor. The wicked ones take advantage of the poor and the oppressed. They use them for their own purposes. That’s natural love for you: taking care of your own and letting those who are different from you fend for themselves. Natural love’s companion is fear, fear of the enemy, fear of those who are different. Because it comes so easily to all of us, we have to consciously work against it; and that’s not easy. We would never torture a sister or brother. We would not even torture a neighbor. We have laws against mistreatment of criminals. All those rise out of God’s call to us to love one another as Christ loved us.

Christ’s love, the true love of the Gospel isn’t limited to our own, nor is it grounded in friendship or familiarity. We love one another because God loves us. It isn’t natural; it’s learned behavior. We love one another because we’ve first been loved by one who isn’t like us in any way. Having been loved by one unlike us, we experience the powerful hope such love can bring. Then we consider loving others in like manner. Since true love isn’t natural, it is something we must learn. It’s something we can’t do unless we’ve been taught. How can you do something that isn’t natural, unless you’re taught to do it? Swimming isn’t something we do naturally. We have to take lessons. We have to practice. If we’re to love others in the way God has loved us, we must take lessons in love. And we must practice. When we’re loved, we learn to love. We love because God loves us.

Some say they love God, yet their actions show they don’t love other people. That raises the question, can we love God whom we can’t see when we don’t love people we can see? Most of us think we can. We do it all the time. It’s easy. It’s much harder to love those we can see, but who are different from us. That’s not love. That’s not the love of God we see in Jesus. It’s not the love we encounter in the community of faith. Or if it is, the community of faith has been corrupted. The love of God is the opposite of fear. Any who seek to capitalize on fear, to use people’s natural fear of those different from themselves as reasons for opposition, can’t love God. Since God loved us by pouring himself out for us, we are called to do the same. You can’t love the God you can’t see, when you don’t love people you can see.

Look we’ve never seen God, nobody has. Our real knowledge of God comes from the faith community where God abides. We learn to love by abiding in God’s love, by being surrounded by others who have learned to love, and who love us. And that love has power to change us. Some years ago, a sociology class in Baltimore identified two hundred local boys as “headed for jail.” Twenty five years later another class followed up that earlier study. Of the two hundred boys so identified, only two had gone to jail. That got the sociologists’ attention. So they researched the backgrounds of the boys, now men. They sought to determine what changed them from “headed for jail” to another way of life. They found one common thread in all the young men’s lives: a school teacher known as Aunt Hanna. The sociologists looked her up and asked her what she’d done. She said simply: “I invested myself in them.”ⁱⁱⁱ We all love because someone loves us. It’s in the community of faith that we see God’s love. Indeed our whole life is changed by one who takes an interest in us, teaching us to love ourselves and others.

Fear of those different from us, our tendency to gather with people who are like us — it all seems so natural. But it is not the way of Christ. It’s not the way God intends us to live. God wants us to dwell in safety with all people, to live in communities bound by God’s love for us and our reciprocal love

¹ Psalm 146:7c-9, as quoted by Walter Brueggemann in *The Word Militant: Preaching a Decentering Word*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007.), 46-47.

for God. There's no fear in that kind of love. God's love casts out fear. We have to learn to live that way. We have to teach each other to love as God loved. It takes dedication and practice. No one has ever seen God. Communities built on God's love make God's abiding presence visible. We love because God first loved us. Those who love God, must love their sisters and brothers also.

ⁱFrederick Buechner, *Now and Then*, (San Francisco: Harper, 1983, paper 1991), page numbers refer to paperback edition., 55.

ⁱⁱPatty Lane, "What Is Love?" *The Protestant Hour: 1991 Presbyterian Series*, broadcast on April 28, 1991, as quoted in *Lectionary Homiletics*, volume V, Number 6, May 1994, page 5.