

Fifth Sunday of Easter
Saint Dunstan's Episcopal Church, Houston, TX
2 May 2021

1 John 4:7-21

One of my favorite things to do is to look at the labels of all sorts of things to see where they were made. Nowadays, most things are made in China, but from time to time, I see “Made in Singapore, Made in Korea, Made in Italy, etc.” Just the other day, I purchased a specialty chocolate bar at a supermarket and was delighted to see that it was “Made in Colombia.” I then looked up the region of the country where it was made and imagined what the people might look like, what the work of producing that chocolate bar might entail, and what the candy said about the people who made it and the country from where it came. It is fun to think about the many people around the globe who make or contribute to the creation of the things we use every day.

The reading from first John is one of the most beautiful readings in the New Testament, and I believe it gives us a manufacturing label for all Christians. The reading boldly states that “God is Love.” What this means, of course, is that all the characteristics of love are found in God, and not that Love contains everything that God is. God is perfect love, but of course he is much more than this, for no one reality can ever contain God or limit God. A better way to say this is, “God loves perfectly, because perfect love is one of his attributes.” We Christians are called to love because we share in God’s love, as John states, “everyone who loves is born of God and knows God.” We all have the potential to love because we all bear the imprint of our manufacturer, we are “Made In God.” We are born in his image, and as such we are born with the capability to love him and to love others. We are “Made in God.” Think about this for a moment.

We often misunderstand the kind of love God calls us to share. In our culture love has become a cheap commodity. It means physical attraction, emotional attachment, it even means certain types of affinity, but it seldom means sacrificial giving, risk taking, endurance, commitment, and willingness to give one’s life for the other. It seldom means the type of love a mother has for her child or the love God has for us. A love that knows no limits in how far it will go to protect the beloved. Now, let us look at this love God is calling us to practice today.

First, this is a type of love that takes the initiative. In other words, love is as love does. John makes it very clear that “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.” God took the initiative and loved us first. Love for him is not a detached emotion, a feeling, some deeply held sentiment. For God love takes action. God becomes human, not because he was expecting our love in return, or because we deserved to be so loved, or because we had done something to merit his love. He simply loved us first. No strings attached and no conditions. This is the type of love God expects us to share with others. But this is extremely difficult. We live in a culture where reciprocity is expected. I scratch your back

and you scratch mine, I invite you to lunch, and you invite me to lunch. I invite you to my home and you invite me to yours. But God calls us to a radical love that acts without expecting accolades, and reciprocity.

Second, this type of sacrificial love is possible because God himself indwells in us and gives us the ability to love this way. John says, "God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us. By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit." The Holy Spirit makes it possible for us to love in a sacrificial manner, expecting nothing in return, and joyfully accepting the challenges that life presents us. I don't mean to say that love has no returns, what I mean to say is that we must be willing to accept the intangibles of love, we must accept to live by the law of unequal returns.

Let me give you an example: As parents we love our children and spend most of our energy caring for them. Now, there are times when we are out of energy and feel overwhelmed, and just at these moments our children come home with a simple drawing that shows how much they love us. Suddenly, that crude drawing becomes the best Mother's Day or Father's Day present we have ever received. That simple drawing can never re-pay us equally for all the time, effort, and money we have invested in your children, but that simple drawing is nonetheless a most amazing recompense for our love. It is likewise with Christian love. We visit the sick, care for our neighbor, show hospitality to those who come into our lives, feed the poor and visit the lonely, and many times there are no visible returns bigger than a smile, a word of thanks, or that amazing feeling in your heart that comes from loving others.

Third, this type of love is possible because we are loved by God. John says, "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." It is the fact that God loved us first, that makes love possible for us. We know what love looks like, we have felt it, we have benefitted from it, we have been changed by it, redeemed by it, made righteous by it. Now we are called to live by it. But we confuse this mandate to live by love. We believe that love is an emotion, and since all emotions are ephemeral (here today, gone tomorrow) we rationalize, "Well I just don't feel like I love this person, or this church, or even God anymore."

What we are saying at these times is not that we do not feel like we love the person, but that we choose not to love the person. Love is a choice we make and not just an emotion. We also confuse love with enabling. And my friends, enabling is the other side of fear and not the other side of love. Many people enable addictions out of fear of losing the person's love. Many people stay in horrendous domestic violence situations because they fear God's punishment, or societal disapproval, or their children's hatred. But my friends perfect love casts out all fear. Sometimes the loving thing to do is to set boundaries and to ensure your own physical safety and the safety of those in your household until the other person is well enough to love you without violence. Sometimes the loving thing to do is to say, "I love you, but I need to walk away until we get some professional help." "I love you, but I refuse to go into bankruptcy to continue to pay for

your drug habit or your gambling debts. I will always love you and support you, but I am contributing to your illness by enabling you.” We can choose to love the other person, while helping them recover, and sometimes this choice can be made even if the other person is not deserving of our love. We can choose to love those who offend us, even if we love them from afar until it is safe to love them up-close. We can choose to place the other person in God’s hands and to pray God will change them, because we know that only God can change the human heart.

And when we love in this way, love itself will free us from all fear, from all anger, and from all emotional pain. John says, “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.” To love without fear is our proper response to God and to our neighbors “The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.” When we love without fear we become the people God created us to be, and we see people for the first time as they truly are. We reach out in love to touch and to care. We allow Love to transform us. We begin to walk in love as Christ walked in love and gave his life for us.

Let us Pray today that God himself will drive away all fear from our hearts, that he will make us ready to love our brothers and sisters as much as he himself loves us, and that he will give us the strength necessary to seek his help and the help of others when our love becomes disordered or violent.

In Jesus name, we pray. Amen!