



Sermon for the First Sunday after Trinity

1 St. John 4:7-21 &
St. Luke 16:19-31

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As I said last week, the lessons that we hear read during Trinitytide—during the second half of the Church Year—are meant to show us what it looks like to live in God’s kingdom. In the first half of the Church Year the lessons show us Jesus and show us how he made our salvation possible. Last Sunday we had that word of warning that Jesus gave to Nicodemus, the Pharisee: You cannot enter my kingdom unless you’ve been born again of water and the Spirit. Today we start this series of lessons that show us what it looks like to be born again—what our new character should be like—and, practically speaking, how to apply in our own lives the grace Jesus offers us at the cross.

Brothers and sisters, the lessons don’t start us out with the easy parts of the Christian life. They throw us into the deep water and call us to swim. Our Epistle this morning is 1 St. John 4:7-21. Here’s how John begins:

Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God.

“Let us love one another.” Why? Because “love is from God.” A Christian should want what God offers and John tells us “love is from God.” As I talk with Christians, though, I often wonder how high love is on our list of things we want more of from God. We want this gift or that gift, we want power, we want more of the Spirit, we want to know the Bible better, we want the ability to evangelise the lost...but it’s very seldom I ever hear someone say: “I want to love God more” or “I want to learn how to love others more”. And yet, friends, John makes this the first priority, and not only a first priority, but one of, if not the chiefest, evidences that we are truly in Christ. “Let us love one another, for love is from God” and if that’s true it then logically follows:

“whoever loves has been born of God”—and not only born of, but “*knows* God.” None of us can truly *love* with a godly love until we’ve been born again. And it also logically follows, as John says in verse 8:

Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love.

Those are powerful words—words I would encourage you to meditate on this week. St. Augustine said, “If nothing else were said of love in this Epistle, and nothing else in all the Scriptures, yet, if the Spirit told us this only, that *God is Love*, we ought to require nothing more.” That may be a bit overly-simplistic, but there’s a lot of truth in what Augustine says, because if we know that God embodies perfect love, then we also know that every time we fail to show love, whether in thought, word, or deed no matter how big or how small—whatever we’ve done against love—is also a sin against God. As Isaac Williams put it, “Whatever is against love is against God.” I know these verses might sound sort of warm and fuzzy at first glance, but can you start to see just how deep the water is here? Even though our culture’s understanding of love is cheap and debased, I think we should all be feeling some conviction of sin when we think about this, because even if we don’t fully understand love, we all know that there have been many times when we’ve been unloving.

But John keeps going. If we thought we were in deep water, he makes the water even clearer and we can see that it’s even deeper than we thought. He’s not going to let us get away with thinking about love the way we’ve been trained to think about it by our culture. He said that love is from God, so he shows us what God’s love looks like. Look at verses 9 and 10:

In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.

John contrasts “human” love with God’s divine love. First, it wasn’t love in word; it was love that truly manifested itself in action. It’s easy to say “I love you”; it’s harder and requires real commitment to actually do something loving. And God

didn’t show his love in a small way. No, he sent his own Son to give us back the life we had lost through sin. And that raises the second point of contrast between human love and divine love. As men and women, we love when it benefits us. We love when we feel like it. We love those who are lovely. We aren’t inclined to love the unlovable. And our current divorce rate shows that it doesn’t take much for human love to evaporate in the face of offense or adversity. God, on the other hand, loved us when we were totally unlovable by human standards. He loved us when we were his enemies. As St. Paul says in Romans, “God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8). St. John stresses the point: God doesn’t love us because we first loved him. We first hated and despised him. But despite being his enemies, he first loved us.

That’s why I say that the water is deep. John tells us that as Christians we should love one another. We think, “That’s not so hard.” And then he shows us the love of Jesus. He’s not talking about shallow, fickle, human love. He’s talking about God’s love—love ready to die even for its enemy. He’s talking about the “deep, deep love of Jesus.” And then he challenges us again in verses 11 and 12:

Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. [Why?] No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us.

Think of it this way: If we claim to love God, we ought to love the things that he loves. That’s why as Christians we should have a love for holiness and a real desire to be holy and to grow in our own personal holiness. But the same principle applies to how and to whom we love. Think about how much God loves you. You were a sinner—his enemy—and yet he sent his Son to *die for you*. God loves you more than you can ever grasp. Now look at the person sitting next to you. *God did exactly the same thing for him or for her! God loves the person sitting next to you just as much as he loves you.* And the same can be said for the person sitting across the room that maybe you’re not so fond of as the person you chose to sit next to this morning. In fact, consider that Jesus died because “God so loved the world”. There is not a person in this *world* whom God doesn’t love just as much as he loves you—and that includes

every person you truly dislike or, dare I say, even hate. It even applies to the people who have sinned against you and done you wrong. Let that sink in, brothers and sisters. And then consider again John's words: "No one has seen God," but "if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us." We can sing our love and praises to God. We can tell him in our prayers that we love him, but God wants to see our love for him in action—and our love for God in action happens when we love the people around us, and especially when we show love to those who are very unlovely. Are we about evangelism? About sharing Christ with others? About being lights in the darkness and showing God to the world? John says that no one has seen God, but they do see God in us when we love the way he loves. This is why Jesus said:

For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.' Then the righteous will answer him, saying, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?' And the King will answer them, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.' (Matthew 25:35-40)

But let me take it a level deeper. Jesus talks about the hungry beggar, the stranger, the sick person, or the prisoner. It's hard enough not to pass by the panhandler on the street or to chalk up the prisoner as some dirtbag getting his just desserts, and yet chances are none of these people has offended us personally. We don't hate them—we just ignore them. That doesn't really express how God has approached us. We weren't just beggars on the spiritual sidewalk asking him for help. We weren't prisoners who had committed a crime against someone else. We were *his* enemies. Showing love to the *unlovely* (the poor, the sick, the prisoners) is part of showing our love for God, but so is showing our love to the *unlovable*: to the person who has said hurtful and offensive things to us; to a bad neighbour; to an ungrateful child; to a bad

mother or father; or to a abusive husband or wife. Remember, God is *perfectly holy*, and because of that there is no sin anyone can commit against you that is as great as even your smallest sin against God. "For God so love the world that he sent his only-begotten Son." There is no person on the face of this earth who is not deserving of your love. If God is willing to love and forgive them their sins—if he loved them enough to send his Son to die for them—then you and I must love that person too.

And St. John makes it clear that this isn't optional. He goes on in verse 13:

By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit.

In Galatians 5, St. Paul lists the fruit of the Spirit. What's the first one, the most important one? That's right, it's love. Paul reminds us there that if the Spirit is in us—if we've been redeemed by God through Jesus Christ—then we will show him in our lives by conforming to his character, and the first and most important character trait of God is love. If we are able to love the unlovable, it's one of the evidences that we are in Christ—which is also means that it's one of the most important ways that we manifest Jesus and the life-changing power of the Gospel to the people around us. This is how we hold our Easter light high and shine it brightly. This is how we reach a world lost in spiritual darkness.

So now John sums it all up again in verses 14 to 18:

And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world. Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God. So we have come to know and to believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and whoever abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him. By this is love perfected with us, so that we may have confidence for the day of judgment, because as he is so also are we in this world. There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear. For fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not been perfected in love.

Our bearing the fruit of the Spirit—and especially love—is evidence of our new birth in Christ and that should be a source of assurance for us. We know we are in Christ because we love. And John—knowing, I think, that he's thrown us into the deep water and that he's challenging us—John exhorts us: The more you love, the less you have to fear. Fear is rooted in sin, but the more we love, the more we experience the love and forgiveness of God in our own lives. Again, he says, "We love because he first loved us." If there's true and godly love in us, it's because God is making his transforming and redeeming work of grace in our lives. But that also means that if we lack love in our lives, if we refuse to show love to others, there's a problem. He says in verses 20:

If anyone says, "I love God," and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen.

Those are scary words, because I know people whom I don't love and I'm sure that's true of all of us. We all have people in our lives who have wronged us, who have offended us, who have been abusive to us—the people who by every human standard it's impossible to love, let alone to forgive. But John says, "If anyone says, 'I love God,' and hates his brother, he is a liar." And that leads us into today's Gospel.

Jesus tells us a story about two men: a rich man and a poor man. The poor man, Lazarus, Jesus says, was sick and full of sores and it sounds like he was probably lame to boot. He camped out at the doorstep of the rich man. The rich man went about his life. He dressed well, he ate well, he lived large with his wealthy friends, while all the time poor Lazarus begged outside his door. He didn't want much—the crumbs from the rich man's table would have been fine—but he got nothing. The most comfort he got was when the neighbourhood dogs came and licked his oozing sores.

Then, Jesus says, they both died. The angels took Lazarus to "Abraham's bosom"—to that pleasant place where the faithful Old Testament saints went to await the atoning work of Jesus at the cross that would open the gates of heaven. The rich man, however, we're told went to

hades, where he was tormented with the unfaithful, the unredeemed. Jesus tells how, seeing Lazarus with Abraham in paradise cried out to Abraham to let Lazarus bring him a drop of water on his finger to provide even some tiny, tiny relief from his misery. Abraham told him that it simply wasn't possible. There was an impassable gulf between the two. Jesus' main point in telling the story was to stress to those who heard him that they needed to make a choice to follow him—that once they died it was too late, as the rich man found out.

But in telling the details of the story, Jesus also drives home the same point that St. John makes in our Epistle about love. Notice that Jesus never tells us that Lazarus was a pious man, that he prayed a lot or anything like that. And he never says that the rich man was a terrible sinner or that he was irreligious. In fact, Jesus never implies either that Lazarus was saved because he was poor or that the rich man was damned because he was rich. Chances are, to all outward appearances, the rich man was a religious man. He was shocked to find himself in hades and had his friends and family known about it, they probably would have been shocked too. Jesus' point is that the rich man was keeping up all the right religious appearances, but that the evidence of his lack of saving faith lay in his lack of love for his brother. And brothers and sisters, we can do a pretty good job too of keeping up religious appearances too. We come to church, we tithe, we pray, we read our Bibles, we're reasonably faithful in doing the things we're "supposed" to do, and we're reasonably faithful in avoided the things on the list of "Thou shalt nots". But are we, like the rich man, simply being faithful in superficial ways and to outward appearances? Where is the love of God in our lives and in our relationships with others? In our Epistle, John, and in our Gospel, Jesus, both tell us that if we have truly experienced the love of God—if we are in Christ and if his Holy Spirit is in us—we will love others the same way that God has loved us. They're telling us that we will love not just the people who are easy to love, not just the people it benefits us to love, and not even that we'll just love the unlovely. They're telling us that the first and greatest evidence of the Spirit in our lives is that we will love the *unlovable*—just as

God has loved us, who were by all human accounting utterly unlovable to God.

We can go through all the outward motions, we can do all the "Thou shalt" and avoid all the "Thou shalt nots", but if we don't love, it's evidence that we have never truly experienced the love of God in Christ. John says, "Whoever does not love abides in death" (1 John 3:14) and "If anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him?" (1 John 3:17). And in our Epistle his point is to say that no man or woman can claim to have experienced the love of God, to have been forgiven their sins and been filled with the Holy Spirit and with the love of God, and yet refuse to let that love pour out to those all those around them.

The Epistle closes with a command in verse 21:

And this commandment we have from him: whoever loves God must also love his brother.

It's not optional, brothers and sisters. Jesus tells us that if we love him, we will keep his commandments. But frankly, this shouldn't be a chore, it should more and more become a joy in our lives. We sinners have experienced the amazing love of God in our lives! That's why we come and sing our praises here on Sunday morning—because we're full of joy! This is simply God telling us, "Don't just *tell* me you love me, *show* me that you love me by loving and forgiving others. Do for them what I have done for you." If we're not willing to do that, John's telling us that it throws into doubt whether or not we've actually experienced God's love and forgiveness, because God's love is *so* great, *so* amazing, *so* awesome, and *so* joy-inspiring, that if we really have experienced it, there's *no way* we could hold back from sharing it with everyone else—even the people we wouldn't ordinarily want to share it with.

Now, that said, it's not that loving some people isn't a challenge, even for the most divinely love-filled Christian. There are people who have done terrible things to us. Some of you have experienced horrible, horrible wrongs at the hands of others. And as much as we should be wanting to show them the love of God,

we're all still packing around our "old man"—our old sin nature. The deeper the hurt, the harder it's going to be to let go. Sometimes the feeling simply isn't there. But the fact is that love isn't just a feeling—it's even more so an *action*. Jesus knew this and it's why he tells us, "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you" (Luke 6:27-28). If we *act* in love, the *feelings* of love will follow. But the bottom line is that if we are in Christ, we have experienced his love, and we *will* show that love to others. Not like the rich man in the parable, who loved the lovable people in his life, but like our heavenly Father who loved his enemies so much that he sent his own Son to die that they might be redeemed, so that they could be restored to his fellowship. Even when it's hard, we'll do our best to try. If we can't walk in love with someone else, we'll crawl—we'll put one foot in front of the other until Jesus teaches us to walk. Whatever it takes, we will do it if the Holy Spirit is truly in us.

Let us pray: "Lord God, the strength of all who put their trust in you: mercifully accept our prayers, and because through the weakness of our mortal nature we can do nothing good without you, grant us the help of your grace, that in keeping your commandments we may please you both in will and deed; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen."