

God Is Love

sermon digest

Covenant Thanksgiving Sunday, November 21, 2010

1 John 4:7-12

larry dipboye

“Having experienced the wonder of Christian love, our faith in God proceeds from the confession of early Christians, ‘God is love’”; these words from our Covenant lie at the center of our common faith. You may not think of yourself as a theologian or have an interest in reading theology books; but, truth is, we are together as church because we share a theology.

Being a theologian has almost nothing to do with ordination to ministry or academic degrees from a seminary. Anyone who has something to say about God has stepped over into the mystical realm of god-talk–theology. He would not like my saying it; nevertheless, Richard Dawkins the famous “new atheist” who wrote *The God Delusion* is something of a theologian. He rants for 374 pages about the god who does not exist. You may be surprised to learn that I share a great deal of common ground with Dawkins. I have no need to defend most of what he describes in the history of religions, mostly Christianity. I really do not mind being counted among unbelievers in the god Dawkins finds so despicable in his excursion along the periphery of religious history. If my idea of god were limited to religious atrocities like the Crusades, the Spanish Inquisition, mutual hatred between Catholic and Protestant in the Reformation or in Belfast, or the hell-fire damnation of Christian Fundamentalism, please count me among the atheists. I dare say that most of us in this room have navigated through many of these stormy theological waters and have decided along the way that we neither endorse nor lend credibility to gods of sheer power, gods of fear and punishment, or gods of simplistic logic.

We have identified our common ground as church in the confession of early Christians, “God is love.” Furthermore, our thinking about God is based on a common experience: “the wonder of Christian love.” When John the elder framed a Christian idea of the God of love, he was intent on distinguishing the God revealed in the face of Jesus from the distorted visions of god emerging in some early Christian circles. That simple fact of life then is the continuing reality that we face now. Being Christian today does not mean that we all share the same vision of God, although it seems that it should. I can speak only for myself, but I am a Christian because my experience of God in the church corresponds to John’s simple conclusion that God is love.

Bob Mesle is a philosophy professor at Graceland University in Lamoni, Iowa, and an advocate of the Process theology approach to dealing with the modern issues of science and faith. He centers his theology, his idea of God, in the statement of 1 John 4:16: “God is love.” In 1987 (July 15-22) of *Christian Century* he described his childhood faith in a church where “I experienced God as a Friend who loved me.” As an adult scholar he writes, “My life-shaping religious experiences at worship services and with private prayer were nearly all intense ones of feeling the love of God poured into my heart so that I could not help but be more loving toward those about me.” Karen Armstrong makes *The Case for God* crossing religion boundaries to find common ground in religious experience: the habitual practice of compassion and the Golden Rule. She calls for people to step outside of their peculiar preferences and prejudices to experience the God of love.

Isn’t it interesting that the ground on which we have come together as church is the common ground described by academics and philosophers as the only ground for faith. On this little patch of theological real estate we find ourselves standing together with John and the earliest Christians, for GOD IS LOVE.

When in Doubt, Do Good

Galatians 5:13-14, 16, 25-26; 6:2, 9-10

carolyn dipboye

The gospel of Christ and the entire thrust of Christian scripture call us to into the risky, unmapped, unpredictable way of love. “‘Love God,’” Jesus said; and “love your neighbor as yourself.” “God is love,” First John insists, “and those who abide in love abide in God.” And though I speak in eloquent, pious, heavenly tones, “but do not have love,” Paul observes, I am nothing more than a lot of noise. It all sounds good, and we pay it lip service; but when we get down to it, it makes us nervous. Stated benevolently, Christ’s church has spent a lifetime trying to figure out just what the way of love means. Stated perhaps more honestly, the church has spent itself in trying to nail down this uncertain, inexact, highly responsive way of life into a few manageable rules, a few essential doctrines or

denominational distinctives and degenerated in the process into anything but the loving, caring *koinonia*. We can almost identify with Paul's frustration on observing the tiny Galatian church derailing itself over the issue of circumcision. "You were doing so well," he mourns, "what happened?" (5:7) Indeed, what does happen?

You are called, Paul insists, into the broad way of freedom in Christ where "the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'" If you want a test for how the church is doing, here it is. It isn't about a legalism that builds walls against our brothers and sisters. It isn't about a selfish freedom that protects my right to recklessly get my own way, regardless of what it does to my family of faith. And it is not about the jealous competition of sibling rivalry and strife. It *is* about living in a mutually supportive relationship where we are sensitive to one another's needs. Rather than competing and walking all over one another or living our lives in indifference apart from one another and coming together occasionally to do something religious, it is about intimate relationship. It is about covenant caring. "We will be priests to one another," we affirm in our Grace Covenant, "ordained by our baptism to the work of a caring ministry." "We will live in harmony with one another respecting the diversity of our Christian experience. . . . We will encourage one another toward responsible discipleship." We pledge, in other words, to seek to make this little community one more experiment, one more thoroughgoing, heartfelt attempt at living out the love that we have known in Christ. Unimportant? Just another church? Full of foibles and uncertainties—yes. That's the way it is with being "an imperfect people" who "know only in part." But that isn't the total story. It is about one more conscientious effort to embody in who we are and what we do and how we relate to one another and the world, the love of God. It is about being a community of grace. It matters for us and it matters for the world of enmity, division and pain in which we commit ourselves to live "as servants of God."

For the past ten or fifteen years I have had a magnet designed by the Baptist Peace Fellowship of North America on my refrigerator at home. The magnet features a silhouette of Martin Luther King and a column of civil rights marchers alongside Paul's words to the Galatians: "But I say, walk by the Spirit. Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ. And let us not grow weary in well-doing, for in due season we shall reap, if we do not lose heart." Those words are appropriate in a world where the efforts of civil rights advocates and peacemakers seem always to be an uphill struggle. I would suggest that they are equally appropriate in every time and place where Christ's church seeks to take seriously its calling to be Christ's ministering, loving presence in the world. At the end of a couple of particularly painful, bruising years where we have lost in death so many we have loved, we are particularly needful of Paul's words of encouragement reminding us who we are and what we are meant to be. In essence, what he says to us is just this: When in doubt, do good. When you are tempted to become discouraged, remember and live out of the sense of mission that first brought you into being. Above all, remember: the God who called us together is the God who leads us into the future. Be faithful to that God.

So, walk together, children. Be who you are called to be. Live and work out of the wealth of love that has been bestowed upon you. And don't you grow weary now, you hear?