

“Revolutionary Love”
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This is a sermon about love. “What’s love got to do with it?” Our text for today is not only centered on the theme of love and loving, it’s also actually the crescendo of the sermon being given by the preacher of First John. A sermon about love from a passage in scripture that is itself a sermon on the same topic. If the topic weren’t so central to our faith, we’d find this redundancy to be ridiculous. So while Tina Turner asks, “What’s love got to do with it?” we know love has everything to do with it.

So, here’s a sermon about a sermon. A sermon on love about a sermon on love—a theme, a topic that our popular culture has only one consistent message about: “that everyone wants love but that we remain totally confused about the practice of love in everyday life. . . . Everyone wants to know more about love. We want to know what it means to love, [and] what we can do in our everyday lives to love and be loved.”

Our scripture gives us a window into an ancient Christian community preoccupied with an idiosyncratic notion of love called agape, widely heralded as the greatest of all loves. Here’s a church community that is yearning to love and be loved but struggling to know exactly how to go about the actual practice of agape love in everyday life.

Here’s a church community that cannot let go of what they know from Jesus’ Farewell Discourse in the Gospel of John: “A new commandment I am giving to you: that you should love one another just as I loved you so that also you should love one another. In this everyone will know that you are my disciples: if you should have love for one another (John 13:34-35).”

Here’s a church, then, that knows that love has everything to do with it! And not just any love, but radical, agape love, which is the love that Jesus lived out and loved others with. Jesus moved into the neighborhood to put flesh and blood on what the practice of radical, agape love looks like in everyday life—to embody what it looks like to put one’s LIFE at the disposal of those one loves—for that is what agape love is—a love that puts one’s own life at the disposal of others.

Of course, this radical, agape, “put one’s life at the disposal of others” kind of love is easier said than done. The preacher of First John knows this. That is why she invites us all to live our lives saturated in the perfect love of God—to abide in love and abide in God. To let God’s love fill us and heal us and hold us *so that* we too can love others as God has so perfectly loved us—without boundaries, without restrictions, without fear and punishment, . . . always and only for our flourishing and salvation.

What in the world does a love like this look like? It looks like Jesus: who lived and walked into our world of hatred and brokenness, our world of divisions and dehumanization. Jesus entered all the oppressive realities of our world, and as he did so, he embodied the healing, loving and just activity of God in these systems.

In doing what he did, Jesus embodied agape love, a love that is from God. A love that is active. A love that is as it does. A love that is, in other words, an act of will—an intention and a clear choice. A love that is a new possibility. A love that can move mountains and that beckons us to push beyond our comfort zones to new things. Sacrifice can be life and limb, and when it is it should be honored as such. But it doesn't have to be. Every time we step beyond where we'd rather be, what we'd rather do, into what might stretch us or embarrass us or make us a bit uncomfortable, for the sake of another, we are abiding in love, abiding in and with God, who is agape love itself.

It is all that easy and it is all that hard. Everyone I know, it seems, is exhausted. Worn out and weary and working to do the best with what we've got when it feels impossibly too much, and never enough. Can we hear in our biblical sermon on love a call to be gentle with ourselves that doesn't lose the edge of calling us to something higher, to something more, to God's best for us and our world?

It is all that easy and it is all that hard. It is much simpler to love with our mouths but allow our actions to communicate a different story: hate, abuse, neglect, disparagement, threat, domination, apathy. After all, we have been socialized to equate love with caring and good feelings. We've been socialized only to try out agape love with a precious few—those of the same color, kin, and kind. But love that is only care and good feelings, love that is reserved only for those like us, is not the love God commands of God's children. If all we've got are some good feelings, if all we do is love those of the same color, kin, and kind, we are not actually abiding in the love of God, which compels us to agape love for ALL our siblings. To abide in love, to abide in God is to live into and live out a love that is bold, that casts our fear, that finds us, maybe even to our own surprise, vulnerably sharing ourselves with those radically unlike ourselves.

What does it mean for this church community to be aligned with the radical agape love of God embodied in the everyday actions of Jesus?

Here is one thought: we must face our collective fear of such a radical agape love—yes, you heard me right, our collective fear of love. Abiding in and loving with the agape love of God is not the easy way, it is not the way of comfort. Loving in this way takes great courage so that we might follow the leading of God's Spirit to make necessary changes in our lives, our habits, our dispositions, our patterns of thinking.

There is no fear in this kind of love. If we are honest, we are all terribly afraid most of the time. Yes, our fears have been magnified during this pandemic, but living with fear is not new to us. Fear is the primary force upholding the many and varied structures of domination in our world, and all around us. Fear is the root cause of our desire for

separation from those not like us. When we are taught that safety lies always with sameness, then difference, of any kind, will appear as a threat.

But when we choose to abide in the agape love of God, we choose to move against fear, against alienation and separation. The choice to love all our siblings is a choice to connect—to find ourselves in the other. To look upon the face of anyone, civil rights activist and founder of the Revolutionary Love Project, Valerie Kaur says, and choose to say: *You are a part of me I do not yet know.* You are a part of me I do not yet know. Kaur has a practice of noticing the unconscious biases that arise in her when she looks at faces on the street or in the news. To practice seeing each of them as a sister or brother or family member, she will say in her mind: *You are a part of me I do not yet know.* She is committed to enacting what she terms: revolutionary love, which she says is the choice to enter into labor for others, for our opponents, and for ourselves, in order to transform the world around us. It is not a formal code or prescription but an orientation to life rooted in joy.

Like the preacher of First John, I believe that Valerie Kaur knows what it is to be born of God. On New Year's Eve of 2016, Kaur's friend, the Rev. William Barber II, invited her to speak at the Metropolitan AME Church, a historic black church in Washington, D.C. As she looked out at the crowded church, she said this, "The future is dark. But what if—what if this darkness is not the darkness of the tomb but the darkness of the womb? . . . What if this is our . . . greatest transition? What does the midwife tell us to do? Breathe! And then? Push!"

Kaur, a woman of deep faith in the Sikh tradition, speaks with full knowledge of the way Jesus embodied supreme love—putting one's life at the disposal of others. And she is inviting all people of faith to be born of God, by loving in the way of God—the way of revolutionary, agape love. She is inviting us to breathe and push—to find our courage to really live as Jesus lived. We must not fall for the lie circulating all over our culture that says that we can hate/hurt/abuse/neglect/ignore/disparage some of our siblings and still be loving. Instead, let us allow the Spirit to birth us into a new way of being—a way in which we reclaim love as the church's public force for justice in our time. Love is more than a feeling. Kaur says that love is a form of sweet labor: fierce, bloody, imperfect, and life-giving. Jesus is showing us the way to this kind of love. It is all that easy and it is all that hard. But as we are God's beloveds, so we truly can love like this because God has first loved us. Such radical, revolutionary love never originates with us. Thank goodness, we are not being called to share our own weak, limited love that we share with God's other beloveds. No, we are called to open ourselves to God's love. To be birthed into this love of God for us so that God can love others through us. So, dear Church, will you allow the love of God to truly penetrate you, to heal you, to hold you, to comfort you, so that that very same love can overflow from you onto all others, no matter who they are, no matter how different they are from you? May it be so! Amen!

