

Psalm 122

<sup>1</sup> I was glad when they said to me, “Let us go to the house of the Lord!”

<sup>2</sup> Our feet are standing within your gates, O Jerusalem.

<sup>3</sup> Jerusalem—built as a city that is bound firmly together.

<sup>4</sup> To it the tribes go up, the tribes of the Lord, as was decreed for Israel, to give thanks to the name of the Lord.

<sup>5</sup> For there the thrones for judgment were set up, the thrones of the house of David.

<sup>6</sup> Pray for the peace of Jerusalem: “May they prosper who love you.

<sup>7</sup> Peace be within your walls, and security within your towers.”

<sup>8</sup> For the sake of my relatives and friends I will say, “Peace be within you.”

<sup>9</sup> For the sake of the house of the Lord our God, I will seek your good.

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**Video: “Agape – Love” (4:49)**

**(Sermon series slide)** I’m so thankful for the video ministry of The Bible Project. They do such good quality stuff. And, especially on a day like today, as we’re wrapping up our sermon series on “Your New Year Wardrobe,” it’s helpful to have such an engaging word study to introduce the last and most important item in our spiritual closet.

**Love** is a good topic for any day, but I’m especially thankful that God worked it out for us to be talking about love on a Valentine’s Day Sunday. What could be more appropriate?

And, in the spirit of saving the best things for last, the Apostle Paul chose to let love be the lingering last note in the list of wardrobe items he suggested to the church in Colossians 3. So, as we come to this last topic in our sermon series, let’s hear Paul’s list one more time. Colossians 3:12-14:

**<sup>12</sup> As God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. <sup>13</sup> Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. <sup>14</sup> Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.**

The language of love and the language of music go hand in hand so well. Don't they?

Shakespeare wrote for the script of Twelfth Night, "If music be the food of love, play on." One anonymous quote online reads, "Life is a song, and love is the music." Many of the Psalms of the Old Testament are songs musically declaring love for God and love from God. The whole Hebrew book of the Song of Solomon is written as a letter between lovers. And, the Apostle Paul carried the connection into the New Testament, first by using a musical metaphor to describe the gift of love. His words in 1 Corinthians 13, now famous at weddings, say, "If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal... or a DJ playing YMCA, the Chicken Dance, or the Macarena for the 100<sup>th</sup> time at the reception." Of course, more positively, here in our text from Colossians 3, Paul declared that love "binds everything together in perfect harmony."

If you've ever felt really well loved, you know how wonderful love can be. In the same way, if you've ever heard really good harmony (whether it was the Pentatonix or Manhattan Transfer, The Eagles or Crosby, Stills and Nash, or Lisa Pickering singing with *anyone*), you know how wonderful it can be, too. One online definition of harmony says that it is a "combination of simultaneously sounded musical notes that produces chords and musical progressions having a pleasing effect." Another says it is "the quality of forming a pleasing or consistent whole." Both love and harmony lift our spirits and bring otherwise disjointed voices together a continuous, pleasing, and fruitful state of agreement.

That's what life in the body of Christ is meant to be like. And, that's the kind of community we're meant to present to the world around us. When Paul wrote Colossians 3, he was writing to instruct believers in Christ – first and foremost – in the way we should treat each other so that the world would see something pleasingly different among God's people. Since we are God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, above all other virtues, we are to clothe ourselves with love. So, how do we become what the video said the church should be - an ecosystem of others-focused, self-giving love?

The New Testament letter of 1 John gives us one of the most helpful statements about Christian love, I think. So, let's hear our New Testament text for this morning from **1 John 4, in verses 11-21**. John wrote:

11 Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. 12 No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us. 13 By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit. 14 And we have seen and do testify that the Father has sent his Son as the Savior of the world. 15 God abides in those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God, and they abide in God.

**16 So we have known** and believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. 17 Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness on the day of judgment, because as he is, so are we in this world. 18 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.

**19 We love because he first loved us.** 20 Those who say, "I love God," and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. 21 The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also. This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

According to 1 John, the first thing we need to do to clothe ourselves with love is to **abide in God**. Abide in God. The second half of verse 16 said it this way, "God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them."

To abide can mean to live in or dwell in something, and it can also mean to accept something or act in accordance with someone. When we abide in God, we do both. We live in God's love and presence, and we act in agreement with God's commandments and God's will. The product of that abiding is harmony, just like Paul talked about in Colossians 3. We are bound to God and to one another in a lived-out agreement between God's ways and our ways, between God's priorities and our priorities. And, just as harmony is pleasing to our ears, the experience of abiding in God is pleasing to our souls.

We caught a glimpse of that pleasure in the first verse of our Old Testament reading from Psalm 122. Did you catch it? **The psalmist wrote**, "I was glad when they said to me, 'Let us go to the house of the Lord!'" Why was the psalmist glad? He was going to get a chance to abide – to abide in God's city and to abide in God's temple. It's where his soul wanted to be.

Do you have a place like that where your soul feels most at home, some place that, when you're away from it for too long, your soul longs to get back there to abide again? Maybe it's a beach or a trail or a cabin. Maybe it's here at church or in some cozy spot in your house or just in the arms of someone you love.

Ideally, our connection to God is meant to be that sort of abiding place for us – that no matter where we are or what's going on in our lives, we can rest in God's love. Like a loving and skilled builder, God has built that kind of abode for us, by loving us first; by sending Jesus to save the world while we were still in sin; by sending the Holy Spirit to dwell within the spirit of each believer. God has built us into a holy dwelling place so that the Lord can abide with us right where we are and help us to experience the pleasure of abiding with Him.

This past Thursday, I saw a great example of abiding in my close friend, Will. Will lives in South Africa with his family, and the two of us connect with three other college friends via Zoom every Thursday morning to study and pray and share life together. This past Thursday, Will confessed he'd had a difficult conflict with his wife, and he confessed that he wanted to be a better husband to her in a variety of ways. And, as we asked him more about that, he confessed that the number one thing he needs to do is to spend more time with God, abiding.

See, because of the maturity of his faith, Will understands **two important things about love**. First, he knows that his ability to love his family starts with his connection to God's love for him. And, that's true for all of us. We love others best when we are abiding in God's love. Second, Will knows that **confession strengthens abiding**. That's the truth of verse 15 of our New Testament passage, that "God abides in those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God, and they abide in God." When we acknowledge our sinfulness and the saving grace God offers us in Christ, we lean into God's grace and mercy. And, that's the best first step toward abiding in God's love and being strengthened to love others.

If abiding in God is the first step, the second step in clothing ourselves with love is **to abolish fear**. Abolish fear.

Verse 18 of our New Testament passage reminded us of this, that “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.”

About two weeks ago, I got an email from the mother of a middle school girl our family has known over the years. The mom mentioned that her daughter had read some things on social media about the end times and been a part of some Zoom conversations about hell with fellow Christians that were making her really anxious and afraid. Since I was the pastor they felt most connected to, they reached out to me. That’s a pretty amazing privilege and responsibility that comes with this job! So, this past Monday, I spent about 25 minutes on the phone with the two of them talking about the girl’s fears and then reinforcing the grace of God whose perfect love casts out fear. I was also really bummed they’d missed our sermon series on the Revelation, but they can always go to our website to catch up on what we’ve been doing. Anyway, I prayed for them. And, before we ended the call, the mom said, “Thank you so much. This has been so helpful. I can already see just by looking at my daughter that she is less anxious and afraid and more at peace about all of this stuff.” Praise God! That’s what the truth of God’s love does. It abolishes fear and frees us to boldly approach the throne of grace and the day of judgment. Because, as Christ is raised from the dead and righteous before God, so are we in this world and in the life to come. Amen?

I think the church has made a terrible mistake over the years by employing fear tactics to draw people to God. Though the Bible is clear that we are to fear God, that fear is more about reverence toward God and the awesome nature of God’s power and authority. We ought to fall to our knees because we’re amazed at God’s holiness and grace, not because we’re so afraid of punishment that our trembling legs buckle until we fall. We ought to remember that the Bible is also clear that our God is the Father of mercies. Our Lord is gentle and lowly in heart. God’s Spirit is an advocate for His people. God is love, and that love abolishes fear. So, we are to do likewise, loving people by working to abolish slavery and inequality and injustice and poverty and hunger and the scary systemic evils of our world.

For many *outside* of the church, I think we need to work to abolish fears related to the church. Research says that Christians can be a scary and intimidating group. We’ve developed a reputation among many as exclusive and judgmental or unwelcoming and condemning.

For that reason, I've really valued the description of Jerusalem offered by the writer of Psalm 122, our Old Testament text. Some of us might be really scared or intimidated to visit Jerusalem these days, even though it is loved by God and the home of many loving people. As outsiders, even though we might want to go there, we hear about attacks and politics and discrimination. So, I love **the psalmist's description** of house of the Lord.

Verse 5 says that there were thrones of judgment set up there, but they were the thrones of the house of David, a king after God's own heart. Our savior is from the house of David, and he has judged us as worthy of his own life and blood and Spirit. I don't think people would be afraid of judgment by the church if we judged them with the loving judgment of Christ.

In the same way, the psalmist was glad to go to Jerusalem because it was a place where **people prayed for peace and prosperity**. That's what we see in verses 6-9. The house of the Lord was a place of love, where the people of God sought the good of others. It was a place of family, where words of kindness and blessing were spoken to one another. Who wouldn't want to go to a place like that? There's no reason to be afraid to go to a place like that, where God's people seek the good of others; where people are made to feel like part of a loving family; and where words of kindness and blessing are spoken. That's the kind of love that needs to define places like this, and people like us. That's the kind of love that binds people together in harmony.

The second step of clothing ourselves with love is abolishing fear.

Finally, the third step is to **act for others' good**. Act for others' good.

The video from The Bible Project said that love is "seeking the well-being of people other than yourself."

And, in verses 20-21 of 1 John 4, we were reminded of this truth, that "Those who say, 'I love God,' and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also."

Remember, we love not because the people around us in the church are any more or less deserving of love than we are. We love, as 1 John 4 reminds us, because God first loved us. And, we are to love as God has loved.

This is challenging in part because we choose churches and come to churches based on our own needs. The questions of the career church shopper sound a lot like, “What’s in it for me? Did I get anything out of that today?” But, as so many of you know and demonstrate so beautifully, being a church that reflects God’s love takes sacrifice. It takes acting for the good of others at least as much as it takes acting for our own good.

I think Victor Hugo, the author of *Les Miserable*, understood that when he wrote, **“You can give without loving, but you can never love without giving.”**

Ultimately, this is the test of whether we are dressed in the love of Christ. What are we giving and sacrificing and doing for the good of others? Have we called or written to that brother or sister to follow up on the prayer request we heard a couple of Sundays ago? Many of you have. Well done. Have we made time to help with the move? Have we hosted or provided the meal? Some of you have. Well done. Will we linger just a bit longer after the service or the class to engage that conversation someone lonely may need to have, or will we set time aside to join that affinity group so that we can lift others up in prayer and support? I hope many of us will.

When lyricist John Fawcett wrote **“Blest Be the Tie That Binds”** in 1782, he leaned into his understanding of sacrificial love to shape the song that has since been published in over 2,000 hymnals. He wrote,

“Blest be the tie that binds our hearts in Christian love;  
The fellowship of kindred minds is like to that above.  
We share our mutual woes, our mutual burdens bear;  
And often for each other flows the sympathizing tear.”

True Christian love is the tie that binds all things together in perfect harmony. It is not easy. It wasn’t for Christ. It will never be for us. But, like the clean underwear or rain coat that is non-negotiable in our wardrobe, love is the item we must wear, above all else, in following Christ.

**So, let’s abide in God**, abolish fear, and act for the good of others as we clothe ourselves in Christian love and in our New Year wardrobe. Let’s pray.