

“God’s Big Words”

I John 4:7-21

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Plymouth Congregational Church, UCC

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1 John 4: 7-21

7 Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. 8 Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. 9 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. 10 In this is love, not that we loved God but that [God] loved us and sent [God’s] Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. 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 [God’s] love is perfected in us.

13 By this we know that we abide in [God] and [God] in us, because [God] has given us of [God’s] Spirit. 14 And we have seen and do testify that the Father has sent [the] 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 [God] 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 [God] 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 [God] is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also. (NRSV)

“God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear;” or as I learned it as a child in the King James version...perfect love casteth out all fear.

I know I heard this scripture quoted in sermons while I was growing up. Never thought much about it. Until I was on to preach on this text for MLK Sunday in 2008. I had just encountered a popular cultural sentiment of the time. “Fear is the opposite of Love...not Hate, Fear is the opposite of Love.”And in that context I heard the words anew, “perfect love casts out all fear...”

The letters of First, Second and Third John were written out of the same community of first century believers as the Gospel of John and Revelation. During the last ten to twenty years of the first century, this little community of Jewish Christians were being persecuted and oppressed by their fellow Jews. Their exuberant faith in the Jesus as the Christ, the Messiah was getting them into trouble. They were literally being thrown out of their synagogues because of their belief in God’s new revelation through Jesus. They had reason to live in fear yet they had *experienced the Living God* through the stories and teachings of Jesus and of his life, death and resurrection. And this set their lives on fire with God’s love even in the midst of fear, persecution and oppression.

I ask myself and you today, “Have you ever been in trouble for your faith? Persecuted, oppressed, fearful because you were on fire with the love of God?”

We celebrate the life of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. this weekend. I believe today would be his actual 88th birthday. He was on fire with God’s love as he led the Civil Rights Movement in its struggle against the on-going persecution and oppression of the African American people. He kept this fire and passion going because of his own relationship with the Living God through the life and teachings and person of Jesus the Christ.

The writing of the first century community of 1 John can sound a bit narrow....only one way to God through Christ...to our pluralistic, twenty-first century ears. As a scholar, King had studied comparative religions. He knew the heart of the Christian gospel and understood the heart of all the great religions of the world. And he believed deep in his heart that God’s Biggest and most transformative and political Word was Love. “God is love “said the writer of 1 John. “Love is the key to the world’s problems,” said Dr. King.¹

It is easy to nod our heads and smile and feel warm making these lovely statements about Love here in this warm sanctuary, with friends and family around, hopefully friendly faces if you are visiting. We all had the opportunity for breakfast this morning. Lunch is waiting at home or at the restaurant of our choice. We’ll go home, watch football, read a book, take a nap, be with our loved ones. It’s easy in this context to say “God is love” and “Love is the key to the world’s problems.”

But then we throw in the part about loving our brothers and sisters...that makes things harder...because sometimes our brothers and sisters do not seem so loveable. They are different from us...in culture, values, religion, skin color, sexual orientation, political persuasion, economic status. And even in the “enlightened” 21st century we are taught to fear “different.” And what happens when the people we do love, those who are not so different from us, act unloving toward us, refuse our attempts at love? Have very different political convictions? Either way, suddenly we are afraid...we are afraid we will get hurt, physically or emotionally, ... its those other people, those “ acting differently people” who are the problem! They are the real challenge to saying “God is Love” and “Love is the key to the problems of the world.” If we could just fix them...Love would be so much easier, wouldn’t it?

Or does the issue goes deeper...

“God is love. We love because [God] first loved us,” says the writer of 1 John. Do we believe that God really loves us, really loves humankind, or that God is just has a sort of disinterested and indifferent, aloof, concern for the welfare of creation and humanity that God set in motion, some senile benevolent benefactor who drowsily hopes that all is going well for us? What if with that crusty, old Christian apologetics scholar, C.S. Lewis, we recognized and internalized that God loves us “with the consuming fire, [of] [God’s Self,] Himself and [Herself], [God is] the Love that made the worlds, persistent as the artist’ love for [her] work, and despotic as a man’s love for his dog, provident and venerable as the father’s [or mother’s] love for a child, jealous, inexorable, exacting as love between [two lovers].”ⁱⁱ

We cannot *woo* God with good behavior, righteous social justice action or right answers into loving us! Because God *is* the *wooer* in this love affair called Life! God is love. We love because [God] first loved us. God’s Love is free and abundant and available before we even think to ask for it! This is the ultimate Christian message, the Big Word of God, the message in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus the Christ, that we are being called to share.

We are at a pivotal moment in our country. You know that and I know that. Fear is looming large in many of us. Anger is looming large in many of us. God’s Big Word of

Love is once again a political word. It never ceased to be. It demanded the entire life of Jesus and of Martin Luther King, Jr. And for them even unto death. It now demands our lives, my friends. We are called to the transformative work of God's love, to its non-violent resistance of fear and racism and bigotry and oppression. We are being called beyond ourselves to stand up and work in the name of God's Big Word of Love for human rights in issues of healthcare for all, immigration, economic and ecological justice. And we are being called to Love, to pray for, those who seem so different from us across political lines in the midst of our work. For they, too, are God's beloveds.

"God's perfect love casts out all fear," says the writer of I John 4.

"Love is the key to the world's problems," said Dr. King as he addressed a group called "Clergy and Laymen Concerned About Vietnam" in his speech, "Beyond Vietnam" in Riverside Church in New York City on April 4, 1967. Just a year to the very day before his untimely death, on April 4, 1968. In this speech he laid out why a civil rights activist is also a peace activist. He shows how the war in Vietnam was not just a travesty in and of itself, but also a war on the 1960's American War on Poverty. He rallied the people of this country to with a cry to revolution that is relevant for our times.

"Our only hope today lies in our ability to recapture the revolutionary spirit and go out into a sometimes hostile world declaring eternal hostility to poverty, racism, and militarism. With this powerful commitment we shall boldly challenge the status quo and unjust mores and thereby speed the day when "every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight and the rough places plain. ... This call for a world-wide fellowship that lifts neighborly concern beyond one's tribe, race, class and nation is in reality a call for an all-embracing and unconditional love for all When I speak of love I am not speaking of some sentimental and weak response. I am speaking of that force which all of the great religions have seen as the supreme unifying principle of life. Love is somehow the key that unlocks the door which leads to ultimate reality. This Hindu-Moslem-Christian-Jewish-Buddhist belief about ultimate reality is beautifully summed up in the first epistle of Saint John: 'Let us love one another; for love is of God and everyone that loves is born of God and knows God. He that loves not does not know God; for God is love. If we love one another God dwells in us, and [God's} love is perfected in us.'"iii

God's perfect love casts out all fear. Dr. King and the ancient community of 1 John were both consumed with the fiery passion of God's love. Let us hope and work with them so that Love will become the order of the day in our fear-filled times. Amen.

ⁱ <http://www.hartford-hwp.com/archives/45a/058.html>, from the speech, "Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break Silence" given by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. at a meeting of "Clergy and Laity Concerned" in Riverside Church, New York City, New York, April 4, 1967.

ⁱⁱ A Year With C.S. Lewis; Daily Readings from His Classic Works, ed. Patricia S. Klein, "January 12, Amazing Love, How Can It Be?" from *The Problem of Pain*, p 14, New York: HarperSanFrancisco, c2003.

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.hartford-hwp.com/archives/45a/058.html>