“Bored with God”

Vienna Presbyterian Church
The Rev. Dr. Peter G. James
1 John 4:7-21
April 6, 2014
Chris and I spent time this past week in the Boston area. I had an opportunity to teach at the seminary where our son Andrew is a student. For those familiar with Andrew’s story, he will graduate this summer and is contemplating, with his wife, Becky, a ministry to the under 30 crowd with a church somewhere in New England.

The highlight of our week was visiting our grandsons Luke and Wesley. We accompanied Luke to preschool. Luke was eager to show us around and introduce us to his classmates. Since the preschool he attends is connected with the seminary, his peers are a virtual who’s who of Biblical names. We met Ezra, Joshua and Grace. One of the friends in his class is a boy named Willge, which means “Who is like our God?”

Even among four-year-old preschoolers you can already see personalities taking shape. We were fascinated by the little girl who, upon entering class every day, makes a beeline to the dress-up area to don a princess costume. Each day she assumes a different persona to match her mood.

Ah, kids, don’t you love them! It was such a masterstroke when God invented kids. They keep us young and entertained.

I know both from raising kids and working with preschoolers that the Christian message must be uncomplicated. You can pretty much forget the big words and fancy ideas. Everything must be reduced to what is simple and straightforward.

“Jesus loves me, this I know,” remains the runaway favorite among the preschool set. Jesus loves me. Even when I am at my worst, Jesus still loves me.

I admit to you I have shied away from preaching on passages like 1 John 4 because most of the sermons I’ve heard on love border on sappy sentimentalism. Yet love is an unavoidable theme in this passage. The word is referenced 30 times in a span of 14 verses. Repetition, as I’ve said before, is the Bible’s way of underlining. If a word appears 30 times in a passage, we would do well to pay attention to it.

The central affirmation of this passage is “God is love” (4:8, 16). It’s more than a trite phrase or a sweet sentiment to send in an Ecard. It’s the heart of the gospel. God really and truly loves us.
Some people interpret this “God is love” verse to mean that love is the only attribute of God, as though love cancels out God’s justice on evil and God’s wrath on sin. I see it differently. Everything God does is based in love. So, whenever God judges evil, He adjudicates in love. Whenever God exercises wrath on sin, He does so in love.

There are two essential affirmations about God’s love from this passage. First, God initiates love. We read in verse 19, “We love because God first loved us” (4:19). This same thought is expressed in verse 10, “This is love, not that we loved God, but that God loved us.” While we might talk of loving God, let’s be clear: God loves us first.

The principle that we love because we are loved is true at so many levels. Children must receive love before they can ever love in return. Infants who are loved are capable of expressing love in return; yet unloved babies become listless and detached. We hear chilling accounts in state run orphanages in many parts of the world where infants no longer cry when they are hungry or need to be changed. What use is there in crying if no one cares enough to respond?

“We love because God first loved us.” Love originates in the heart of God. C.S. Lewis writes, “God loves us not because we are lovable but because God is love.”

The second affirmation about God’s love in this passage is that God demonstrates love. Verse 9 says it well, “This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him.” The words “one and only” are traditionally translated as begotten. I memorized John 3:16 as a child: “God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son that whosoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life” (John 3:16). Somehow I committed this verse to memory without having a clue what the word begotten meant. In the Greek, begotten is “monogenes,” a compound word consisting of “mono” meaning one and “genes” meaning kind. Jesus is quite literally one of a kind. He’s in a class all by himself. If you want to see what love is like, look at Jesus. He models God’s love.
We discover two qualities about God’s love in this passage. First, we learn that God initiates love. “We love because God first loved us.” Second, we learn that God demonstrates love. God sends his only begotten Son that we might live through him.

So, what difference does this sermon on love make in my life?

If God initiates and demonstrates love, our response is to love God and neighbor in return. Three times in this passage we’re commanded to love one another. At the outset we read, “Beloved, let us love one another, for love comes from God” (4:7). In the middle we read, “Beloved, since God so loved us, we ought to love one another” (4:11). At the end we are told, “Whoever loves God must love his neighbor also” (4:21).

We’re focusing this Lent on loving our neighbor. Loving one another is a critical aspect of our church’s mission, that of “Becoming like Christ together for the world.” Jesus gave us two great commands. Loving our neighbor appears second on the list.

To love like God loves takes an act of God. That’s why each member of the Trinity helps us love like God loves. God the Father initiates love by sending his Son (4:9). God the Son demonstrates love by laying down his life (4:10). God the Spirit lives in our hearts to make it humanly possible to love our neighbor (4:13).

Arthur Miller was a noted American playwright in the 20th century. He received considerable fame when he married actress Marilyn Monroe in the mid-1950s. By the early 60s, their marriage was already unraveling. Miller attempted to revive their marriage by writing a screenplay for Marilyn. By the time it was made into a movie, Marilyn was sinking further into alcohol and prescription drug abuse. At one point in the shoot, Marilyn was hospitalized for two weeks with a drug overdose.

Miller writes in his autobiography, *Timebends*, about the night a doctor was summoned to Marilyn’s beside to administer a tranquilizer to help her sleep. Arthur recalls entering the room where Marilyn was sleeping and feeling a wave of sadness come over him. As he watched her, he found himself straining to imagine a miracle. He writes, “What if she was to awaken and I was able to say ‘God loves you, darling,’ and somehow she was able to believe it. How I wished I still had my religion and she hers.”
This is a powerful confession from a man who often declared himself to be a confirmed atheist. We’re not told whether Miller ever actually told Marilyn that God loves her. She died 19 months later from an apparent drug overdose.

God loves us. Wherever did we get the notion that the first thing God feels for us is disappointment or disgust? God loves us. This simple truth could change the trajectory of our lives.

Now, for the sermon title: The early church fathers from the 4th century compiled a list of sins which we call “the seven deadly sins.” Surely there are more sins than seven, but these seven certainly qualify as killer sins: lust, gluttony, greed, sloth, anger, envy and pride.

There’s an animal living in the South American rainforests called a sloth. It comes by its name naturally since it’s the slowest mammal on earth. It’s so sedentary that algae actually grows in its furry coat. Sloths spend most of their days hanging from trees. They sleep anywhere from 15-20 hours a day.

I love this painting by Pieter Bruegel in 1564 on the subject of gluttony and sloth. But the desert fathers didn’t have this kind of sloth in mind when they added it to the list. The Latin word for sloth, acedia, equates to spiritual lethargy. The desert fathers called it “the noonday devil.” As the monastics practiced the spiritual disciplines of prayer and Scripture meditation in the heat of the day, they felt the tug of spiritual sloth. It was a struggle not to become bored with the things of God.

We can treat this declaration that God loves us as a sort of ho-hum sentiment. Like the desert fathers, we run the risk of becoming bored with the things of God.

Kathleen Norris has written a provocative book on the subject of sloth entitled, Acedia and Me. She observes that we can succumb to spiritual sloth either by a general listlessness or hyperactivity, which is a particular malady for Northern Virginia suburbanites like us.

This morning we are welcoming 77 children who have been a part of our Sacrament’s Class to the Lord’s Table. Sixteen of them were baptized
either last Sunday or today. On such a momentous day, let me speak for a moment to parents and families.

Parents, if you treat this class like a “check the box” exercise, likely it won’t stick. If you want your children to walk in the way of the Lord, you’ve got to walk this way yourself. It won’t work to talk a good game. You’ve got to walk the talk.

Some of you are all about your child’s musical and athletic achievement. I’m challenging you today to devote as much time and attention to faith development as you give to athletics and musical pursuits.

I said earlier that comprehending God’s love for us could change the trajectory of your lives. God’s love is that important! We love because God first loves us.