

## **1 John 4:7-21 New International Version (NIV)**

<sup>7</sup> Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. <sup>8</sup> Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. <sup>9</sup> 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. <sup>10</sup> This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. <sup>11</sup> Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. <sup>12</sup> No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.

<sup>13</sup> This is how we know that we live in him and he in us: He has given us of his Spirit.

<sup>14</sup> And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world. <sup>15</sup> If anyone acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God, God lives in them and they in God. <sup>16</sup> And so we know and rely on the love God has for us.

God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in them. <sup>17</sup> This is how love is made complete among us so that we will have confidence on the day of judgment: In this world we are like Jesus. <sup>18</sup> There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love.

<sup>19</sup> We love because he first loved us. <sup>20</sup> Whoever claims to love God yet hates a brother or sister is a liar. For whoever does not love their brother and sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen. <sup>21</sup> And he has given us this command: Anyone who loves God must also love their brother and sister.

## **John 15:1-8 New International Version (NIV)**

<sup>15</sup> “I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. <sup>2</sup> He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful. <sup>3</sup> You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. <sup>4</sup> Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me.

<sup>5</sup> “I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. <sup>6</sup> If you do not remain in me, you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. <sup>7</sup> If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. <sup>8</sup> This is to my Father’s glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.

“God Is Love”  
The Rev. Lisa J. Durkee  
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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, Oh Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

**God is love.** And whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in them. What a comfortable home, don't you think? I want to recall to you another passage from scripture that is probably very familiar to you. While I won't share all of it now, I would like to have us use the word God where we usually hear the word love. Now reading from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, in the 13<sup>th</sup> chapter.

“<sup>4</sup> God is patient and kind; God does not envy or boast; God is not arrogant <sup>5</sup> or rude. God does not insist on God's own way; God is not irritable or resentful; <sup>6</sup> God does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. <sup>7</sup> God bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

<sup>8</sup> God never ends.”

Isn't that kind of wonderful? I have loved having this idea in my head this week, even as I have been praying for our brothers and sisters in India, Myanmar, Afghanistan, Columbia and other places where violence and disease are frightening. God is love, and love is manifest in all the ways Paul describes. This is one lesson that I believe we should have a difficult time misunderstanding. If we are to live in love, and God is love; if we are to live in God, and God is love, then we also are to behave in such a way that all those attributes are evident in us. They are to be the fruits of our loving vine, Jesus Christ, in whom we must remain.

When we give in love, we give from the wellspring of Jesus' love for us. When we cut ourselves off from one another, from the church and somehow from Jesus, we can be quite certain that our fruit, our lives will be less abundant, less plentiful. The unfortunate truth is that when we cut ourselves off from one another, we miss out on discovering the gifts of the Spirit in them. When we cut ourselves off from living into the Spirit's gifts in us, others also suffer. Without God in us, we are less patient, we are less kind. Without God in us, we too often rejoice in the wrong and not in the right. Without God in us, we are too often irritable and resentful.

But the gift we have before us, laid before us time and again, because God never ends, is that the table is open. Jesus' gifts bear endless fruit and we simply have to graft

ourselves back onto the vine in order to assure our ripening. This week, as I pondered the ways in which I have seen love in action, and worked to believe that “perfect love casts out fear,” I have thought to share just a couple of stories with you. I was reminded of the first as I read the several autobiographies of race in the curriculum a dozen or so of us are following in our study of White privilege. Part of the program that is difficult to admit is the way in which with the figurative scales falling off my eyes recall to me ways in which I have been more fearful than I have been loving. Some of this is inherited in a way, because I grew up in a New Jersey community in which our town was apparently segregated by race and religious affiliation, though in fact it likely was segregated by socioeconomic class.

So, I learned something about love only a couple of years ago that helped me see the way in which some of my early fear had prevented the possibility of love. You see, when I would drive into NY City with my mother as a child and we would pass through neighborhoods in upper Manhattan and the Bronx. When we needed to stop at a red light, my mom would tell me to lock the door. I would do so without wondering why, but definitely internalized the idea that the *place* was so different that it was frightening. The *people* were so different that we needed to protect ourselves. Different we were, but because of recognizing difference as threatening rather than as interesting, we were afraid. What has permanently changed my mind about those neighborhoods was an invitation. It was just a couple of years ago that a friend from Mali invited me to visit the neighborhood in the Bronx to which he had originally emigrated. We strolled along streets in which *I* was the different one, and we were greeted with smiles. We ate a delicious meal before catching some music in a small club where the music invited people of all races to dance together. We rejoiced together in the things that bind us, and nobody locked the door.

Heading downtown the next day to meet other friends in order to caravan to their performance in Yonkers, we moved from *my* minority position in *their* midst to a public garden in which the only people of color were my friends on stage. They were greeted with smiles and we all danced together on the grass in front of the djembe player as he incited us to *move*. My friends were invited there, are respected for their talents and what is revealed in our sharing together is that making invitation creates the space for greater love. And greater love has cast out fear—at least for me.

This idea of invitation has led me also to think about hospitality overall. I have often been grateful for a good friend’s axiom: “If you want to come see me, drop in anytime. If you want to see my house, give me twenty-four hours.” We are often afraid of what people will think of our homes. I would limit this by saying, “*I* am concerned about what

people will think,” but I know from countless others that we humans worry about others’ opinions of our housekeeping—and of other aspects of our lives. I am often reminded, though, that even regarding such things, “perfect love casts out fear” of what others think. Love first, offer hospitality first, and those other distractions matter less. For this reason, I hope that you will always know warm reception when I invite you to the parsonage. You may see dust bunnies, but I pray our conversations, our prayers—and music—will be more lively than they. I learned this from my mother, about whom my sister-in-law once said that she was not bound by domesticity. I would add, though, that she *was bound* by hospitality. Ours was the house when we were children to which my friends knew they were always welcome, and in the next generation Mom, now also Beema, extended the same welcome to my nephew’s friends when he and my brother lived with her for eight years. She loved them, never fearing their dreadlocked, tattooed, Death Metal music loving searching. She made invitation, offering hospitality that taught those young people they could rely on her. Her hospitality taught them to be people on whom others could rely.

As we gather after worship today, I would love for us to share stories that illustrate for us the times we have known love to cast out fear. Maybe this will carry into our conversations with the women in our lives whom we celebrate today, as well. The mother figures in our lives have been ones who taught us to love, sometimes with stand-in mothers when our own were not available, and sometimes with mothers filling the roles of fathers, too. How and when have we relied on love to teach us not to fear? When we abide in love, we abide in God, and this is my prayer for us today. May we indeed abide in God, and receive the love of God in Jesus Christ who *invites* us to receive him, to let him abide in us, making us patient and kind, not irritable or boasting, nor insisting on our own ways.

Thanks be to God. Amen.