10.5.25 Sermon Transcript – 1 John 4:7-21

Okay, who counted? Did anybody count? I got distracted so I lost count. How many? 28. 28 times we find some variation of the word “love” in the passage. That's a whole bunch of times. I mean, that's just a couple of paragraphs. So love, love is the theme of the day. Last week we talked about the idea of love of enemies. We're going to continue talking about love today. Love is the universal message of the Gospel.

I've worshiped in a number of different places around the world. In my travels I've worshiped in an Arabic-speaking church in Nazareth, in an English speaking-church in Jerusalem. I've worshiped in a French-speaking church in Canada and also in France. I've been to worship in Istanbul, in Turkey as part of the Orthodox church. I've been in London in the big cathedrals. And then when I lived in Scotland, I attended a small Presbyterian church. All across those places that I've been fortunate enough to have the experience to worship in, I've heard that same message proclaimed that we heard this morning – that God is love and that we know what love is because of God. Then, even more, we are called to love one another because in loving one another we are all also showing love of God.

And so when we look at this passage this morning, this letter that we know as 1 John, is not a typical letter like some of the other epistles. It reads a little bit more like a sermon than some of the other letters, or like a theological meditation. The letter is written to a network of early Christian communities. And in these early Christian communities, they were struggling with fear, they were struggling with division. There were questions over teachings in their communities. There was a group of people called the Gnostics who were saying that Jesus didn't really come in the flesh, he was just a spirit. The material world is bad, so the divine would never come and enter into the material world. Jesus was just spirit. He just looked like he was human. So there were disagreements and there was a lot of fear. This community was fracturing at the time of the writing of this letter. It was probably written between 85-95 CE. It’s about a couple of generations at this point after the life of Jesus,

And so the author of the letter tells this community, God's love is embodied. God's love came down to be with us in Jesus Christ in every single way. The idea of God as love in this letter is not some abstract or vague ideal. It's a concrete claim about God in the flesh, about God with us. That is the central idea, that is the central definition of love in this passage – God in solidarity alongside human beings in every single way. It's the heart of the whole letter.

How do we know God? The answer is, through love. Love originates in God. And to love is to participate in God's life. That's what this letter says. God's love is embodied in Jesus Christ, and then then we too are called to be an embodiment of that love. That love casts out fear, it casts out division. It unites us together and it unites us to God. When 1 John says God is love, it's not describing just one characteristic of God among many others. It's describing the very essence of who God is. Love, in the words of Howard Thurman, is the foundation of being. It is the very essence of God. To know love is to know God, and to know God is to know love.

Last week, I briefly shared with you the different words for love in Greek that have different meanings. And there's that word *agape*, which is that self-giving love, that unconditional, unfailing love. This is the kind of love that God is. The scripture this morning said, “Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God. Whoever does not love, does not know God.” For God is love. And that's not sentimentality, that's not niceness. It is, in fact, a scandalous claim that love is the ground of being. That love is the very nature of God. And as Howard Thurman reminds us in Jesus and the Disinherited, love is not just what God does, it is who God is fundamentally at the core.

And what does that love look like? It looks like this: “God's love was revealed among us in this way. God sent his only son into the world so that we might live, live through him.” Love becomes flesh. Love shows up with us. Howard Thurman knew that in his bones as a black man in the Jim Crow South, a child of a formerly enslaved grandparents, he knew. He knew what it was to have his back against the wall. And he knew what fear, and deception, and hatred and all of this could do in his life and the way in which that impacted him and his community. He knew that division and hatred were tools of oppression. He also wrote, though, that Jesus offers that different way, that way of love, and that's what we've been examining over recent weeks. And so love for Thurman is not about excusing injustice, but rather it's the ground of being that affirms the human being in the face of sin, in the face of death – it’s dignity in the face of degradation, and hope in the face of despair. Love is God's solidarity with those whom the world despises. Love is God's solidarity with those whom the world despises.

God doesn't love from a distance. The word solidarity means “standing with.” It doesn't mean standing over, lording it over. The love of Christ is the fullest expression of divine love and divine solidarity. Emmanuel, Christ with us – it's hard to believe we're just a couple of months away from Advent, the season where we focus on the incarnation of Jesus, meaning “Jesus in the flesh.” Jesus with us. Divine love also bears the weight of human suffering. Jesus came. He experienced grief and hardship. He experienced oppression and death. He died, descended to the dead, even into the darkest places. God goes with us, because God is love that never, ever leaves us alone. Love refuses exclusion.

Jesus was always getting in trouble, or people were always muttering and gossiping about him because he was eating with those sinners, with “those people.” He was calling into the center those who were traditionally found in the margins. He crossed the ethnic and cultural boundaries, inviting all to be a part of God's kingdom. The love of Christ overcomes fear and division. We heard in the passage this morning, perfect love casts out fear. Fear might isolate, fear creates enemies. Fear tries to justify violence. But in Christ's love, these barriers come down. There's no longer anybarrier between Jew and Gentile, or slave and free, male and female. Every tribe and nation are gathered around one table.

Love is resurrection power. The resurrection reveals that solidarity is not just for a moment, but it is, in fact, forever. When Christ descends to the dead with us, Christ also then brings us with him into new life. The cross says “God is with us in the depths,” and the resurrection says “God, will not leave us there.”

In short, Christ's love means that God is not above us or beyond us, but that Christ is with us and for us to the very end and even beyond what we think of as the end. Today, I can't help but think about how much fear drives the world. Fear of the stranger, fear of scarcity, fear of losing power, fear of the things that we don't understand. Every day, the news headlines reflect yet another iteration of that fear playing out in our world. Fear builds walls, and fear builds hatred.
Fear tries to justify violence.

But the table that we come to today is built not on fear, but on that love, that fullest expression of divine solidarity. The Communion table is a table that casts out fear. It's a table that says "There is enough bread for all, that there is a place for everyone who wishes to come. There's enough grace for everyone. There's enough space here for you. There's enough space here for me. There's enough space for our neighbor next door, and there's enough space for our neighbor on the other side of the world, who perhaps lives very differently than we do."

Back in 1933, so almost 100 years ago at this point, World Communion Sunday was first celebrated not terribly far from here. It originated up at Shadyside Presbyterian Church in Pittsburgh. It was in the middle of the Great Depression – it was a time of deep economic fear and fear, and fascism was on the rise abroad. And the idea was a simple but radical one. It was the idea that for one Sunday, churches all around the world would celebrate Communion together as a witness to the unity of the body of Christ. And so in 1933, that was the first year that this happened. And then it was eventually adopted by the Presbyterian Church, and later it was embraced by what is now known as the World Council of Churches.

By the time of World War II, where nations were literally at war with one another, this practice of world Communion became a really powerful reminder that in Christ's body, enemies and strangers become siblings, that the divine love of God is what unites us together. When we love one another, when we recognize that we are a part of something much bigger than we can imagine, we are, in fact, knowing God, because God is love.

Today is World Communion Sunday, and there are churches of many denominations around the world who recognize this day and recognize the reality that when we come to the Communion table, Communion is always global. Communion is something that spans time, and it spans geography. Every time we break bread, we join a great cloud of witnesses, those who are living and those who have passed on, not just those here in this room. World Communion Sunday simply makes explicit that which has always been true, that Christ's table transcends all boundaries, all borders. It's a visible sign of God's solidarity with us and with the rest of humanity. We live in a world that is marked by nationalism and racism and exclusion. But on this day, we particularly recognize that we share a common life and a common unity together that transcends those things.

Communion is not just personal nourishment. While it certainly provides that in some ways, Communion, is a protest meal at a table where there are no VIP sections, there are no reserved spots for the high and mighty, there are no checkpoints to get into this table. There are no first-

class and third-class citizens at this table. Everybody has a spot of honor and of welcome. It's proclaiming a kingdom that is not built on coercion or status, but on invitation.

Today, we will gather at this table that stretches farther than we can imagine. This morning, across our country and around the world, in churches and grand cathedrals and small house churches, in storefronts and in refugee camps, Christians will gather (or have already gathered) to share in this meal, this bread and this cup, this sign that we participate in every Sunday here at St. Mark's reminding us that God is with us in the day in and the day out, in the very substance of life, in the most basic things that we need – food, nourishment and community. When we come to this table on World Communion Sunday, we're coming to a story that is bigger than ourselves. We're linking arms with saints across time and space. We come to eat this bread and drink this cup and to declare that love is indeed the ground of being. It is the very foundation upon which we stand, the very foundation upon which we were created, the very foundation and essence of God. So today, when we gather at this table, may we remember that love is the ground of being, that love is the ultimate expression of divine solidarity, and that love is what binds us together across every single border. And then when we rise from this table, may we go out to live that love in a world that so desperately needs it. Amen.