

GOD IS LOVE

1 John 4:7-21

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Babcock Presbyterian Church

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This morning I will be making some observations about what's happening in Baltimore City but first I want to focus on this morning's scripture. Even though it was written sometime between 90 to 100 A.D. it still has something important to say to us today, especially in light of current events.

St. John was inspired to write, "God is love." In other words God is the personification of love. Love created the heavens and the earth. Love called Abraham to be the father of a great nation whose descendants would bless all the people of the earth. Love motivated Christ's coming into the world God so loved. You'd agree it's a great relief knowing God is love even though we can be downright unlovable.

Earlier in this letter John used the term "atoning sacrifice" to describe what Christ's crucifixion accomplished on Good Friday. Atonement or at-one-ment with God is now possible because Christ reconciled or bridged the gap between God and us. We are saved not because we are good but because God is love.

The New Testament proclaims loud and clear Good Friday was the ultimate expression, or better still, outburst of God love poured out over everyone. Christ went that far to prove what lengths he would go to tear down the walls we built up keeping us from God and each other.

You already know this. You learned it in Sunday School, you heard it in sermons and you depend on it for your peace of mind. But do we really appreciate God's love or do we take it for granted?

Back in the '60's the Doobie Brothers sang

Jesus is just alright with me
Jesus is alright
Jesus is just alright with me
Jesus is just alright
I don't care what they may say
I don't care what they may do (because)
Jesus is just alright
And he's my friend

I agree with most of the lyrics in this song, yet I'm left wondering if just saying "Jesus is just alright with me" goes far enough. Somehow this perception of Jesus falls short. It's too casual, maybe a bit too familiar, lacking intimacy and awe.

Don't get me wrong "Jesus is just alright with me" is a good starter but it shouldn't end there because Jesus expects us to take on a lifestyle of self-denial and cross bearing. What's more the lyrics "I don't care what they may say or do" imply not caring about anybody else as long as Jesus is just alright with Me.

A few Sundays back I expressed concern for what passes as Christian preaching by the televangelists. Jesus is marketed as a celestial ATM machine dispensing wealth and granting wishes. I even heard one of these motivational speakers describe the cross as God's plus sign which in my mind denigrates Christ's atoning sacrifice on the cross.

Unfortunately their television audience is left with a user-friendly brand of Christianity: God loves you, so you don't have to worry about anything if you accept the right doctrines, embrace the correct political agenda and think positively. Bonhoeffer called this cheap grace..."the grace we bestow on ourselves the preaching of forgiveness without repentance, baptism without discipline, communion without confession...grace without discipleship (or sacrificial servant hood), grace without the cross, grace without Jesus, living and incarnate."

This gospel preaches a mutant Christ winking at our sins and blessing us with favors because after all Jesus is just alright with us.

But this heresy is nothing new. In Old Testament times the prophets railed against the same brand of watered down religion. God's people told themselves if they went to the Temple and offer up a sacrifice as sort of a fire insurance they could go back home to practice their wicked ways. Seventy years ago Harry Emerson Fosdick summed it all up in the ditty,

They do it every Sunday
But they'll be alright by Monday
It's just a little habit they've acquired.

So how should we answer these heretical teachings feeding people what they want to hear and reaffirming their self-centered inclinations? We can agree God is love, however his love demands an appropriate if not radical response. And that response should never be based on fear. Loving God shouldn't be something we're frightened into doing but something we want to do because God loved us first. That's why John wrote:

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 (or experienced) perfection in love. We love God because God loved us first.

Until Jesus came religion was based on fear, fear of divine punishment but also the fear of not having enough, of being ignored, fear of failure, fear of strangers, fear of the world. False religions play on these fears to keep people in line.

But doesn't the Bible say we should fear the Lord? Yes it does, but we need to realize the phrase fear of the Lord originally meant being in awe of the Lord. There is a difference. You can never really love someone you're afraid of but you can love someone who inspires awe. God is awesome, far beyond us yet choosing to live with us to cast out our fears so we can experience love.

Jesus' biggest challenge was trying to convince the religious people of his day that fear is not in God's vocabulary. Fear leads to envy and pride, suspicion and prejudice, self-preservation, separation and anything else that dehumanizes God's children.

What's really insidious about the power of fear is it can make us feel self-righteous, better than the people we're prone to stereotype. Come to think of it, this is the same trap the Pharisees fell into back then and latter day Pharisees fall into today.

One of the possible consequences of the riots in Baltimore City is negative stereotypes are being reinforced. More than just the looted stores and trashed neighborhoods will have to be restored in the months and years ahead before peace and justice can be restored.

So what should be our reaction to this terrible situation? Do we circle the wagons and isolate ourselves from this messy world? Or do we choose the way of Christ and reach out and love with the love that casts out fear?

Before any knee jerk reactions drive the conversation wouldn't it be better to stop and prayerfully reflect not just on what happened but why it happened? I'm not suggesting we make excuses for the looters who destroyed people's livelihood or rogue policemen who abandon protocol in the heat of the moment. But we should recognize these aberrant behaviors are symptoms of deeper complex problems.

Last Tuesday I attended a meeting of clergy. One pastor of a Presbyterian African American church in the inner city warned against stereotyping either the police (he said he had members of his congregation who are good and honest police officers) or stereotyping inner city kids (he also said he has good and decent kids in his church too). But he also warned, "This is a complex problem many years in the making. We have dysfunctional city schools, bad parenting, no jobs for young people, and underlying it all is a culture of frustration, fear and despair."

A gospel of cheap grace will never properly address these challenges and frustrations facing people in the inner city. And at the same time I don't think it's helpful to allow the riots

and looting of the few to distract people of good will away from the frustration and despair brought on by the cycle of a generation of poverty that is destroying lives.

My task as a preacher this morning isn't to suggest political solutions, I wouldn't know where to begin. But it is my responsibility to present these problems in the context of Christ's Gospel and ask the hard question: If God is love, what should people who claim to know God's love be doing about these things?

Our New Beginnings House Groups began meeting this week. Four small groups of eight to twelve Babcock members have committed to a process of prayerful discernment to assess our congregation's material and spiritual assets and then prayerfully consider who and what God is calling us to be and do in the near future.

I suggested several weeks back it's no coincidence that these House Groups will be assessing our congregation seeking God's guidance into the Season of Pentecost, when the Holy reinvigorated the disciples and empowered them to overcome the world fears with Christ's Gospel of love, grace and peace. Then a few days ago while preparing this sermon I started wondering, is it also a coincidence we are entering this New Beginning Assessment during this painful time of upheaval? I don't think so. I stopped believing in coincidence a long time ago. I now believe things never happen haphazardly. What's more it's very possible God already has for Babcock Church some type of outreach ministry to the new people moving into our neighborhood that we can do together if only because God is love and love casts out fear. What do you think?

I'd like to close with a reading from Paul's letter to the Romans exhorting them to live the new life in Christ and then listing the marks of the True Christian who embraces the notion of costly grace.

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect...

For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness.

Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God' for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." No, "if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads." Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.
(Romans 12:1-21)