

LOVE. ANY. WAY.
Sermon for Easter 5B—1Jn 4:7-21
LPC, 5/3/15

Were you counting when you heard that reading from First John? Did you notice how many times you heard the word “love” or one of its derivatives? How about twenty-nine times? I guess this love stuff is really important!

As a Christian preacher, there are three things I want to say about love. The first thing is that love really can save the world. That is why according to the Christian gospel, God really wants us to do it. And so you get passages like this one in the New Testament, where every other word, it seems, is love.

The second thing I want to say about love, at least the love God wants us to do, is hard. If love weren't so hard, humanity might have shaped up long ago. Love sometimes asks us to do the opposite of what we want to do. Love even sometimes asks us to do things that are opposed to what we know is also good, like righteousness and justice. Yes it does. That's what Jesus' death shows. It wasn't righteous or just that Jesus should die. But Jesus submitted to an unrighteous, unjust death to demonstrate that things like righteousness and justice, worthy as they are, can't hold a candle to love.

And love hurts. Not always, obviously. Love *can* take you to the top of the world. I love my new granddaughter so much that just seeing her photograph can make me happy all over. Yet when I have to say goodbye to her, not knowing when I will see her again, my heart breaks.

Then there's the pain that comes when someone you love is hurting. Honestly, is there anything worse? But even when love causes us heart pain, we don't wish the love away, do we? We wish the pain away. Unfortunately, wishes don't generally work

Recently two people I love with my life got into a terrible fight. Eventually they apologized and returned to speaking terms, but they will never be friends unless something happens that I can't foresee. This realization caused me heart pain so strong I've found myself wishing for the emotional equivalent of a morphine drip – you know those IVs that doctors give hospital patients so they can press a valve a receive a boost of pain meds when they need it?

For awhile my heart pain was constant and I prayed for relief. The only thing that worked at all was to keep loving the parties involved. When love causes pain the only thing to do is to hold tight to the love. As Henry David Thoreau wisely said, “There is no cure for love but to love more.”

Now, Thoreau used the word “cure,” but in fact, love does not cure pain. In fact, loving is just about a guarantee of pain of some sort. But as John says in his letter, love will cast out fear. It's fear that makes pain unbearable. Keep loving, and the pain, through the love of God which shares our painful burdens, will be bearable.

Here is the third thing I want to say about love. Ultimately, love is the only thing that “works.” There will be no “war to end all wars.” There is no legal or political system that will solve all of humanity’s problems. The only thing that can change human hearts is love.

At this point I want to reiterate what I have said several times before, that when the Bible talks about love, it doesn’t mean the feelings of affectionate attachment or strong desire that we associate with the word today. Love in the biblical sense means the active desire for the other’s welfare. To love your neighbor as yourself means to be as protective of that person’s life, rights and happiness as you are of your own. I say again, to love your neighbor as yourself means to be as protective of that person’s life, rights and happiness as you are of your own.

In Madeleine L’Engle’s science fiction novel *A Wrinkle in Time*, there is a monstrous being called “It” that absorbs people and sucks out their personalities. The main character, a teenager called Meg, discovers that It derives power from hate. She reasons that if she could bring herself to love It, she would defeat It and release the people he has absorbed. But It is pure evil, and moreover It has Meg’s beloved little brother. Meg can’t make herself love It, so she concentrates on loving her brother, and that is enough to turn the tables and free her brother.

We may not always be able to love perfectly, but with God’s help we can love as much and as well as we can, and it will make a difference.

Even if we love, we can’t expect things to change overnight. We have to love and keep loving even when the problem seems intractable and progress is invisible. This is what being faithful is.

God is faithful to us. God keeps loving us even when we keep making the same mistakes over and over. And we are called to faithfulness in loving God back, and in loving each other. As I said earlier, nobody said this would be easy.

Here is where some famous words of Mother Theresa of Calcutta, adapted from a secular version by Dr. Kent M. Keith, are helpful.

*People are often unreasonable, irrational and self-centered. Forgive them anyway.
If you are kind, people may accuse you of selfish, ulterior motives. Be kind anyway.
If you are successful, you will win some unfaithful friends and some genuine enemies.
Succeed anyway.
If you are honest and sincere, people may deceive you. Be honest and sincere anyway.
What you spend your years creating, others could destroy overnight. Create anyway.
If you find serenity and happiness, some may be jealous. Be happy anyway.
The good you do today will often be forgotten. Do good anyway.
Give the best you have, and it will never be enough. Give your best anyway.
In the final analysis, it is between you and God. It was never between you and them anyway.*

So there we are. Love can be hard. Love anyway. Love any way.