

All you need is love! I John 4:7-21

The story is told of a congregation who had just called a new minister. Everyone was excited about meeting their new pastor and hearing him preach. On Sunday morning, the sanctuary was packed. The people sat on the edge of their pews in anticipation of his first sermon. Sure enough, it was a doozy. He selected as his text, 1 John 4:11, “Beloved, if God loved us in this way, we also ought to love one another.” As the sermon ended, heads nodded, and the Pastor Nominating Committee breathed a huge sigh of relief. He was a keeper.

But the next Sunday, as the new minister read the text for the day, a few of the old saints raised their eyebrows, for it was the same text as the Sunday before – 1 John 4:11, “Beloved, if God loved us in this way, we also ought to love one another.” They’d never heard two consecutive sermons on the same text before. But, they gave the new preacher the benefit of the doubt, as they listened carefully and tried to be open-minded. But as the preacher began his sermon, it was the exact same sermon they’d heard the week before.

They didn’t know what to make of it. “Was this some sort of joke?” they wondered. “Were they supposed to get some deeper meaning the second time around? Was he even aware that he was repeating himself?” Out of courtesy, they didn’t say anything. They just listened politely and, when the service was over, shook hands at the door and said something like, “That was a mighty interesting sermon you had for us today, Reverend.”

The next Sunday, everyone was on pins and needles. The tension was thick as the service began. One could sense a storm

was brewing. When the new minister began reading the text, the congregation began squirming in their seats, for, once again, he read from 1 John 4:11, “Beloved, if God loved us in this way, we also ought to love one another.” And, to their dismay, he began the sermon with the same exact words as the two Sundays before.

But before he could get past the introduction, one of the elders jumped up and said, “Preacher, we’ve heard this sermon twice now. What gives?”

The minister looked at the elder and said, “Why, nothing, really. Do this, and I’ll give you another sermon next week!”

“Beloved, if God loved us in this way, we also ought to love one another.” This is the heart and soul of the gospel of Jesus Christ. It’s what distinguishes us as Christians. In the words of the old camp song, “They’ll know we are Christians by our love, by our love, yes, they’ll know we are Christians by our love.” God loves us, and we, in turn, love one another – that’s the essence of the Christian faith.

It’s easy to get tired of the reminder to love. We know this stuff. And we know that it’s the core of the Good News of God sending Jesus to us. Yet, when we try to put love into action, it’s a lot easier said than done. This must be why John kept talking about love, again and again.

On June 25, 1967, the British Broadcasting Corporation, commissioned the Beatles to write a song for the United Kingdom’s contribution to a T.V. show, called Our World. This was the first live global television link. The Beatles were asked to write and perform a song that would contain a simple message to be understood

by all nations. What was the song they wrote? “Love is all you need.” With that song the Beatles struck a nerve that was felt around the world. It hit home to the heart of over 400 million television viewers in 25 countries. Then they quickly released it in the UK, where it soared to top of the charts to number 1. Then they released the song in the US where it also reached number 1 on the billboard charts.

The concept of love reaches down into the deepest part of almost every human’s soul. It has such an appeal to people that Amazon has at least 245,000 books with the word “love” in its title. If you do a Google search on the word “love” you will find that it has almost 500 million entries. Television and movies would not make the money they do without stories of tingling, titillating, and rescuing love in them.

But, even though “love makes the world go round,” there is so much interest in it, and so many ideas about love, it’s clear the world still doesn’t get it. One term for sin in the New Testament is “missed the mark.” We humans have missed the mark in understanding love, as well as defining love, and in practicing and experiencing love. So often we define love on our terms and in ways that benefit us. And some times we really have strange practices and destructive definitions of love.

A few years ago Britney Spears had a number 1 hit with a love song whose chorus appealed to the love starved masses. It goes: “My loneliness is killing me. I must confess, I still believe. When I’m not with you I lose my mind. Give me a sign. Hit me baby one more time.” It’s strange that millions worship the concept of love through this song. Being physically hit by someone, or this is a synonym for being

provided drugs, or it’s a euphemism for sex, is how they know they are loved. Sounds sick to me. And I understand this isn’t even as bad as some other popular songs. So we need to be reminded as to what love is, and what it is not, because it’s often hard to do. Plus we are surrounded by a culture that has defined love wrongly.

The idea of love is both simple & complex. It can be used to manipulate. It can be used as a weapon. It can mean you should not make me sad, frustrated, or angry. Love touches on every part of life. As much as we desire it & twist it, we know that God’s kind of love constantly resonates with us as much as it stretches, expands, & challenges our attitudes, thinking, and doing.

Jesus was once asked, ‘Which is the greatest commandment?’ To which He replied, ‘To love God first, and secondly to love our neighbour as ourselves’ (Matt 22:35-40). We know this and theoretically it sounds wonderful, until we realize it means, “Do to others as you would have them do to you.”

Having a sense of what God really wants, and what Jesus’ death on the cross really means, this goes way beyond, you and me. It affects economic policies - like a living wage, international trade policies, equal pay for equal work, how much profit is moral and fair, the growing gap between rich and poor, how much we spend on the military and national defense in contrast to helping the weakest in our society and the world.

Loving our neighbor involves our treatment of refugees, First Nations peoples, how we manage all the social services, and on and on. This also includes, some tough love – training and education and expectation that people will get to work and behave rightly. I don’t think God is talking about just

getting along with each other. He's talking about love – real love – that builds people up, holds them to healthy expectations - not just sex, romance, fun and feeling good.

God's definition of love also involves living out the Ten Commandments – listed in the sermon insert. There we find warnings about idolatry, worship, family dynamics, encouragement to be honest and trustful and not selfish and jealous.

Two comments: First, choosing to live these commandments is an important way to love. It leads to the peace and shalom that the Bible wants for all humans. Living these out daily and completely, builds good relationships with God and each other. Bullying is an example of what love is not.

And second, it's important to remember, in people's search and desire for love – love and its attributes can become an idol that replaces God, which is where the 10 Commandments start. The apostle John in I John 5:3 tells us, "For the love of God is this, that we obey his commandments."

And we know God's love isn't simply a romantic relationship. Despite what many books, movies and television shows teach – it's not about sex, or even friendships and feelings. It's about how we live together, as families, in church, locally, provincially, nationally and internationally.

Which means, even issues like climate change, pollution and ecology, affects ourselves, our neighbours – near and far, our children and grandchildren, is a love issue. Another way to make the point that love is about relationships of all kinds, it involves the political decisions we allow our politicians to make. So God's love is a big bold request and vision – way beyond

any small selfish definition we choose. It's wonderful, mind boggling and complicated.

An interesting exercise is to go on line and look up the results of what "Love is Not." Kiera R Lewis' poem, What Love is Not, describes love this way: Love is not joy, Love is not pain, Love is not a toy, And you can not see it through the rain. Love is not a CD,

you can not play it back to back.

Love might leave your heart empty,

and make it crack, crack, crack!

Love is not food,

You can not gobble it all up.

Love is not a mood,

You can not change it with a buttercup.

Love may be good and love may be bad

But once you've found that great love,

you'll be glad you had!

I wonder if she's talking about loving and following Jesus?

You probably haven't missed all the public shaming and firing of powerful men in various positions over the last months. We are receiving a lesson of what love is not. The "hashtag Me Too" and "Times Up" movements are an appropriate cultural moral attack on misogyny, which is defined as the hatred of, contempt for, or prejudice against women & girls. It can be manifested in numerous ways, including social exclusion, sex discrimination, hostility, patriarchy, male privilege, belittling of women, violence against women, sexual objectification and a lack of equal pay.

Its past time we recognize the underpinning and back ground of these issues – it's not sex – its selfishness, power, and abuse of people who need and want to work. It's clearly a lesson in what love of neighbor is not. I hope it provokes good conversations about the difference between harassment

and flirting and appropriate behavior, the way we dress and attitudes toward each other. It's good this is forcing organizations to review and improve their sexual misconduct policies. God's definition of love extends into all areas of life. So this creates discomfort in us at times.

In our scripture for today the word "Love" is used over 25 times in several forms. This is twice as much as any other Bible passage. It emphasizes that God is love and that each person in the Godhead is represented and made known to us. First, God the Father shows His love for us by sending his Son. (vs 9) "God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his Only Son into the world that we might live through him." So we should extend ourselves to others.

Second, God the Son showed his love by laying down His life for us. (vs 10) "In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us & sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins." So we are called to do likewise in whatever ways God's asks. What does he ask? "Those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also."

And third, God the Holy Spirit affirms His love by dwelling in us. (vs 13) "By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit." John tells us as we work at being followers of Jesus, love becomes perfected in us. There is lots of trial and error, but as the Holy Spirit guides us, we keep making the right love decisions, in each of our situations.

Love is much more than receiving physical, emotional and warm fuzzy benefits. It's also extending these to all others, in appropriate measure. By God's example, love only gives, and hopes it receives. God extends himself, offers us guidance on how

to love, but loves us anyway even when we don't respond or respond wrongly. God offers us a covenant, not a contract. And he asks us to follow his example, Jesus, as we love everyone. God is the source of love.

To close, here is a last thought. We know part of John's reason for writing this book was to offer assurance to followers of Jesus, facing false prophets, persecution and an uncertain future. So he writes, "Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness on the day of judgment, because as he is, so are we in this world. 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."

This concept of love cannot be underestimated. It means we boldly love those who mistreat us – like God loves us. It means we grow in taking on Jesus' love so that we don't let fear sabotage our ability to love the unlovable. It means we ask the Holy Spirit to keep infusing us with the power of love. As we are made perfect in love, we overcome anxiety, insecurities and the fear of death. Instead we grow in confidence toward and with Almighty God.

An old Scottish lady was right. When she was visited by a very young minister who was short on experience, she held fast to her firm assurance of her salvation in Christ because he loves us. "But just suppose that after all God should let you sink into hell?" asked the minister.

"He would lose more than I would," came the firm answer to faith. "All I would lose would be my own soul, but He would lose His good name."