

There Is No Fear in Love
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1 John 4:7-21

⁷ Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. ⁸Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. ⁹God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. ¹⁰In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. ¹¹Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. ¹²No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.

¹³ By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit. ¹⁴And we have seen and do testify that the Father has sent his Son as the Savior of the world. ¹⁵God abides in those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God, and they abide in God. ¹⁶So we have known and believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. ¹⁷Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness on the day of judgement, because as he is, so are we in this world. ¹⁸There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. ¹⁹We love because he first loved us. ²⁰Those who say, 'I love God', and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. ²¹The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.

John 15:1-8

¹ 'I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine-grower. ²He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. ³You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. ⁴Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. ⁵I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. ⁶Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. ⁷If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. ⁸My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.

Pray with me: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, Our Rock and Our Redeemer. Amen.

I don't need to tell you that our country is drenched in fear. It seeps into every state, every county, every city, town, and village. It clings to us like humid southern air. We cannot shake it off of us, as if it is part of our very skin. Fear, anywhere you go, is the root of oppression, of inequality, of discrimination. Fear is the root of the stories of Freddie Gray and Michael Brown and Trayvon Martin and far, far too many before them, and so many still today. As such, fear is the root of poverty and hunger and anger. Why? Because fear keeps us from sharing our wealth, sharing our food, even sharing our knowledge.

“There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear.” If love won out over fear, perfect love abolishing it completely, money would be shared, food would be shared, all would be looked out for. If my love of my neighbor was greater than my fear, what would I not do for that neighbor? But, instead, I fear being too friendly with my neighbors because they might ask something of me which I don’t want to do and then I’d either have to say “no” and deal with conflict or say “yes” and be miserable.

I’ve been working with some faculty and staff over at Carroll on the study of a book which has as its goal to release, or recharge, creativity. The study is twelve weeks’ long and in the past week, an exercise toward this goal was to take ten strips of paper, write down on each a fear, worry, or concern and put it in a container to symbolize a commitment not to dwell on those specific fears. Within a half hour of rapidly and easily writing down my ten, I recognized four more as I pondered the day ahead of me. Those four fears? Three of them are ones I have carried with me every day for a long while. The realization was surprising. Like I said, fear clings to us.

If love has not won out, then fear has a say on to whom I speak and what I say; fear has a say on how I spend my money and if I give it away. For some, fear weighs in on other decisions, like theft and intimidation and violence and even murder. I have been privileged enough in my life to not be placed in this position. I have had a roof over my head, a job when I needed it most of the time, more than enough to eat, access to medical care and safe streets to live on, the freedom to delay earning an income in order to continue my education. And yet even I still know that fear can be aggressively loud. Is there any among us who has not known this deafening fear?

“There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear.” This was written not as an indictment but as an encouragement. That still holds true today. Now, “The love and the perfection come from God, whose perfect love casts out fear,” as Professor Ronald Cole-Turner says. He continues “We can honestly admit that we are not yet perfect in love, for it is God’s love that makes us loving, and it is God’s perfection that is making us ever more holy.”¹ Of course, we don’t rely only on God. God didn’t give us free will for us to sit idly by while God worked on us. We choose whether we will work with God or against God. Edmund Burke said, “The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good [people] to do nothing.”²

The original speaker is uncertain but the truth remains, if you are not angry, you aren’t paying attention. We feel uncomfortable when we read the passages where Jesus displays anger. However, to be angry with the conditions, the institutions, and even the people bringing pain to God’s children is absolutely befitting our God. If we are loving as God loves, then we set aside those fears which

¹ *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 2*, p. 468.

² Mark Bryan with Julia Cameron and Catherine Allen. *The Artist’s Way at Work: Riding the Dragon: Twelve Weeks to Creative Freedom* (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1998) p.196.

perpetuate inequality through dominance, through wealth, through the desire for control. Pastor William L. Self writes, “Fear cannot generate love, sympathy, tenderness, or compassion... The fruit of fear ends up being distrust, suspicion, and resentment.”³ But Jesus says, “those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit.” To abide in Jesus, to abide in God? Well, “God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.”

These are hard words. The good news of the gospel is not meant just for some but for all. If we contentedly believe that it is only meant for most or, worse, meant for those who think like us, then these are hard words we must hear, we must heed, in order to be obedient to our God. Pastor Gary W. Charles explains, “On the one level, love as obedience removes the fear of punishment for disobedience. On the other level, love as abandonment of self-interest and self-concern cuts the ground from under fear.”⁴ We hope that surely this is not the kind of love God asks of us. It is too difficult. It asks too much. To abandon our self-interest and self-concern goes well beyond discomfort. But Professor Ronald Cole-Turner makes the point clear: “It is not power or law or prosperity, but self-sacrificing love that is the heart of the truth about God.”⁵ God is self-sacrificing love, and those who abide in self-sacrificing love abide in God, and God abides in them.

Our reading from John speaks of the fruit-bearing branches being pruned so they will bear even more. Again, “We can honestly admit that we are not yet perfect in love...”⁶ I know you. I know you have been bearing fruit. I have seen it. I have experienced it. Can we bear more fruit? Is there still hunger and poverty in our corner of the world? These words we hear today are the snips of the pruner, leaving us raw but improving our chances of becoming even more fruitful than we have been before. And this fruit we bear is not for ourselves, for what vine planted bears fruit for itself instead of for the one who did the planting? The fruit we bear is for our God and, if we are serving our God, then we are surely serving God’s children. Again, these words were not written as an indictment but an encouragement. Pruning a fruitful branch is not an indictment but an encouragement. Our God and our faith give us freedom to choose if we will behave as if chastened or galvanized. What will you choose?

Let us pray: Lord, in your loving care make us to burst forth with abundant fruit, the fruit of love in such abundance that it casts out all fear, we pray. Amen.

³ *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 2*, p. 471.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 2*, p. 466.

⁶ *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 2*, p. 468.