

WORSHIP

Sermon | 3.15.2020



Love One Another

The Reverend Pen Peery

1 John 4 (various)

Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God;

Everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not love God because God is love.

God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him.

God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. 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 casts out fear.

The commandment that we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.

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Our text for preaching on this Sunday is a passage I chose about three months ago. Only by God's providence could these words would be so relevant for us today.

Listen with me for a word from God.

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So this is little strange.

Being here – all of you looking in from out there.

Maybe still in your pajamas – or workout clothes.

Every Sunday we gather, a large portion of our worshipping community includes those who join us by way of our television ministry, as well as those who join us online. But – so far as I know – for every Sunday in the last 199 years of our church's history until today – when a preacher stood in this pulpit there were at least some members who have been in the pews. Today is different.

What you may or may not know is that when the preacher is here – and you are in the pews – we can see you. There is some communication that goes on between the pulpit and the pew – even if it is of the non-verbal type.

We notice when people are resting their eyelids.

We notice when the 10-year-old has to step out of the sanctuary to use the bathroom ***exactly*** when the sermon starts.

We can feel it when the sermon is going on a little too long or, let's be honest, when it's just not one of our better offerings...people shift in their seats, there are some subtle coughs, heads swivel to count the bulbs in the chandeliers.

And when we're preaching well, or, more accurately, when we're talking about things that are real, when the good news becomes palpable – we can literally feel the room paying attention...and we hear the snuffle, or the umm (which is the Presbyterian version of a Baptists' "Amen!").

There is a power in knowing that God's message of hope reaches people who share the same need, who have experienced the same joy, or hurt, or fear.



You can literally *feel* it when God's people gathered in one place, under one roof, experience the touch of grace...when the gospel resonates through the people in the room.

And that's what is so strange about today.

Because today there is an absence of that personal connection.

I miss it. I miss you.

All because of this dadgum virus.

I've read what seems like 37,000 articles about the Coronavirus in the past few weeks. One of the phrases that has found its way into our lexicon is "social distancing."

That's why we are not worshipping in-person today...and for who knows how long. It's why Little League is postponed, and funerals, and wedding receptions, and school, and...life, right?

And that choice we've made – to change our behavior in order to slow the spread of the virus – is important. Scientists are clear that our choices now will save lives later. When you think about it, it's not a difficult decision (even though we probably all agonized over it just three days ago).

The thing is – we're not built for social isolation.

We're built for connection.

I went to the grocery store yesterday – on a futile quest for bread and toilet paper. And I have to say – watching people actively avoid one another was odd. We all knew we were in this thing together. There was a sense of comradery as we bemoaned the lack of supplies of the shelves. But the overflowing carts we pushed around the store were our buffers – our boarder walls.



I was with a grieving widow on Friday. Someone whose smile I am used to seeing light up a room, but whose lamp was low. It was someone who – on numerous occasions – would take both of my hands in hers and lift my spirit with an encouraging word or a loving question about my family. On Friday, every fiber of my being wanted to embrace her to comfort her in her grief. Instead we stood...looking at each other. It was odd.

It's only been a few days.

I realize there is so much we have yet to know – and, depending on how long this crisis lasts, there are implications that will certainly give us lots to think about and do –

but in these early moments I believe the great challenge and opportunity we face is how to maintain our ***need to be together – and our need to be for one another*** – even as we keep our distance.

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Twenty years ago, Tom Hanks starred in the blockbuster hit, *Cast Away* – where he played the part of Chuck Noland – a sole survivor of a plane crash who washed up on an island in the South Pacific where he lived on his own for four years. One of the reasons Hanks won a Golden Globe and garnered an Oscar nomination for his acting is that he was the ***only*** person on screen for about half of the two-and-a-half-hour movie.

In the film, the way Chuck copes with his isolation is to create a personality for an inanimate object – a volleyball Chuck decorates with a hand print and calls Wilson. Talking to Wilson is a big part of why Chuck makes it through the time he was stranded; that relationship was his life-line to hope, to courage, to patience.



Last week, as you probably heard, while filming a movie in Australia, Hanks and his wife, Rita, contracted the coronavirus. Like others who have contracted the virus, they are spending 14 days in isolation in a hospital room. But they are not alone.

A friend of mine sent me an article with a picture of Hanks in his hospital gown smiling and holding a replica of Wilson the volleyball.

It turns out one of the overworked, underpaid health-care workers at the hospital who knew how difficult it was to be suffering and alone cracked the door to Hanks' room and rolled Wilson in.

That's the kind of humanity that is called for in moments like these. It's the kind of creative commitment to connection that we need.

And it is not unique.

That's why all across Italy people are opening their apartment windows across courtyards to sing with and to one another...demonstrating their connection.

It's why younger people are helping older people pick up prescriptions from the drugstore or food from the grocery.

It's why neighbors are gathering...not on their patios, but in the cul-de-sac – camping chairs set up six feet apart – to share stories and embrace life together.

It's why school buses that carried children on Friday are being set up to carry breakfast and lunch to those students who won't be able to eat in the school cafeteria tomorrow.



It's why clergy who usually gather in their own houses of worship on Friday or Saturday or Sunday are coming together to lift up a common message of hope — for a community that shares a lot more than the differences about what they believe.

It's why today and tomorrow...and next week and probably the week after that... you and I are going to have opportunity after opportunity to show up for one another. We are all – no matter our age or our stage – going to have multiple moments to affirm the beautiful truth that connection is something we share – even at a distance – that we belong together – that we are better together.

And, who knows, we may look back and realize that disrupting our normal routines served not only to protect us from a virus...but it awakened in us a compassion...maybe even a compassion that we have neglected because we forget that we are connected, one to another.

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“God’s love was revealed to us in this way,” the writer of 1 John says, “that God sent his only son into the world.”

God didn't sit on the sidelines and cheer us on.

God didn't set the pieces in motion and hope that we figured it out.

God doesn't choose to wait until everything is over and then remind us of a love that will not let us God.

God's love was revealed to us in the flesh – in the person of Jesus – someone who inhabited our lives – who entered our daily routines – who faced the same risks, and disappointments, and dynamics, and pressures, and germs that we do.



We don't have to wonder – we know that God loves us because God showed up.
Which is what God asks us to do for one another.

There are a lot of words in this book – a lot of history, a lot of rules, a lot of stories that speak to the complexity of life and relationships...and the mystery of faith.

But there is also a thread that runs through the entirety of Scripture – from Genesis to Revelation – it's the greatest commandment – it was Jesus' elevator speech when he was pressed to boil the law down to a sentence – it's the fruit of what people of faith have to offer to the world:

That we love one another.

That we love our brothers and sisters who are created in God's image...which is all of us.

That we take seriously the ways in which we are each in need.

The hourly wage earner who wonders what “working from home” means for them and their ability to put food on the table.

The spouse of someone in the nursing home memory care unit who can't make their usual daily visit to sit a spell.

The banker whose deal is suddenly in jeopardy of closing.

The high school senior whose soccer season has just been cancelled.

The homeless couple who no longer have Room in the Inn.

The emergency room doctor who anticipates having to make choices about who has access to care.

The immunosuppressed who are afraid leave their homes.



The impact of this virus doesn't discriminate.

Yes – it highlights the reality of our brokenness – where there are many who do not have the margin or the privilege to weather this storm, compared to others of us.

We should learn from that.

We should lean in – and pay special attention to those who are most vulnerable.

But there doesn't need to be a filter on our compassion.

We all stand in a place of needing love and care – and being able to offer love and care.

To recognize that is to see each other as God see us.

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My friends, the promise that we claim today and through our faith in Jesus Christ does not inoculate us from disease, and it does not shelter us from suffering.

The promise is that throughout the life we share – in all of its beauty and struggle and gift – God is faithful and present.

God is abiding in steadfast love.

And that love is fierce.

And it is stronger than disease.

And it will outlast suffering.

And it will outpace fear.



You and I are reflections of that love – in the coming days that is what we can be for one another. That is what we need to be for one another – no matter the distance.

So let us rise to meet the moment.

Let us claim the power of God.

Come what may, let our connections to one another be what we remember about this strange season in which we find ourselves.

Because “the commandment that we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.”

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit – Amen.

