Humor writer Robert Orben once said, “I always wondered why babies spend so much time sucking their thumbs; then I tasted baby food.” In our scripture today, the writer of First Peter is trying to encourage his readers to channel their inner infants, well before any questionable baby food or Cheerios ground into the sofas appear, going all the way back to the beginning to see the message of how to live out their lives of faith.

In the historical context of our scripture this morning, First Peter was written to the early Christian community in Asia Minor as an encouragement to them in their struggle to live together as people of faith in the midst of cultural and religious tensions with the world around them. And so the writer of the letter is trying to inspire these new believers to find ways to apply the gospel messages of love and equality to their former lives, families, work, and surrounding institutions with both integrity and kindness to draw other converts toward belief in Jesus as the Christ. To manage this feat, the writer points out, they need to model the mutual love and respect for one another that imitates Christ’s own love for the world in his life, death, and resurrection.

It’s no small task though, is it? Hey there, new believers, I know that you’re just learning how to do this whole Christianity thing, but you need to show everybody how amazing Christ is by the way you treat each other, even though you’re also dealing with a situation kind of like being stuck in a hot car on a 15-hour car ride, squashed into the backseat with your somewhat annoying cousins who you’re trying to deal with, and who also come from a completely different background from you. Any of you who had long car rides with siblings growing up, or who have ever ridden in a car for more than 10 minutes with small children know that this is a mission involving heroic amounts of patience and perseverance to accomplish.

So our letter writer acknowledges that living in a ragtag community of believers from all kinds of backgrounds is hard, and he reminds this struggling group that they really don’t have to have it all figured out at this point. Instead, they need to go back to the basics of their faith and hold on to what is certain and enduring--God’s word of love--and treat one another accordingly, letting go of their grumpiness, judgments of one another, competitiveness, and snarky comments. Don’t get caught up in all the peripheral debates about theological technicalities or anything else that gets in the way of you loving God and one another, the writer is saying, but be like newborn babies, and seek out the pure, spiritual milk of God’s love that will show you that God is good! That’s what will help you grow into mature sisters and brothers in Christ.

It’s a nice, clean image, that whole being like newborn babies to seek the pure, spiritual milk of God thing, bringing to mind pictures of drowsy, happy babies cooing at their parents as they drink sweet, snow-white milk with a contented sigh. Yes, you may be thinking, how lovely that we get to go back to a simpler time to drink in the goodness of God. And this is absolutely correct. But becoming like newborns to drink the pure, spiritual milk isn’t just about the nutritional content; I think the description becomes even more powerful when we see that
newborn image in terms of the frequency of needing that milk too! As a parent of two little ones, one of whom still wakes up multiple times a night some nights, it also brought to mind a vision of zombie-eyed parents feeding the baby incessantly to get through the 8-12 feedings a day that a newborn requires...8-12 feedings that sometimes turn into upwards of 16 or 20 feedings during a growth spurt. And let’s be honest: the community in Asia Minor at this time, was in a major growth spurt.

Many of you may know that the entertainment industry of the 1980’s not only brought us the fine mustaches of Hulk Hogan, Wilford Brimley, Alex Trebek, Lionel Richie, and John Oates, but we also got a dose of Tom Selleck’s iconic ‘stache in the 1987 movie *Three Men and a Baby* with costars Steve Guttenberg and Ted Danson. In the film, three bachelors have to figure out what to do when a baby is left on their doorstep, leaving them to care for her in a series of funny missteps. In one scene, Peter, played by Tom Selleck, is trying to figure out how to feed the tiny baby girl saying, “The book says to feed the baby every two hours, but do you count from when you start, or from when you finish? It takes me two hours to get her to eat, and by the time she’s done it’s time to start again, so that I’m feeding her all of the time.”

In the same way, the community in Asia Minor that the writer of First Peter is addressing not only needed to go back to the simplicity of the message of God’s love as a newborn consumes only the simplicity of milk, but they also needed to hear this message with the same frequency that newborns need to consume their milk. After all, babies eat so often not only for the constant nourishment that their growing bodies need, but also for the reconnection and attachment with their parents or caregivers that they find during these frequent meals. Here, the writer seems to point out that, by going back to the basics of our spiritual nourishment, and focusing on both God’s love for us and on mutual love for one another, we can feed our spirits and reconnect with God and with each other.

And really, this message of going back to the center, to the foundation of our faith, to reconnect isn’t just helpful for the brand new Christians in the Petrine letter that we read this morning. In just the past few weeks we’ve seen the pain caused by denominational divisions as we dismissed First Presbyterian Church Selma to the Evangelical Presbyterian Church over disagreements of scriptural interpretation, and we’re inundated with endless political ads claiming that one candidate is more Christian than the other because of his or her conveniently selective interpretation and voting records on “Christian” issues that thinly veil self-serving political ideologies.

This past October, Pope Francis gave a homily to talk about these kinds of divisive ideologies disguised in Christian clothing saying:

“The faith passes, so to speak, through a distiller and becomes ideology...In ideologies there is not Jesus: in his tenderness, his love, his meekness. And ideologies are rigid, always...And when a Christian becomes a disciple of the ideology, he has lost the faith: he is no longer a disciple of Jesus, he is a disciple of this attitude of thought...The knowledge of Jesus is transformed into an
ideological and also moralistic knowledge, because these close the door with many requirements.”

And so, more than ever, we need to hear a word of good news that strips away the divisive turmoil that pits Christian against Christian in order to find ways to open the doors of our faith and unity as followers of Christ. That good news is that God’s love and our call to mutual love for neighbor (all of our neighbors, even the ones with whom we disagree), is the crux of God’s eternal and imperishable revelation to all humankind.

It follows the old tale of the man who came to the ancient Jewish scholar, Rabbi Hillel, with a challenge, “If you can teach me all of the Torah while I stand on one foot, I’ll convert to Judaism.” Rabbi Hillel paused and then calmly replied, “What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor: that is the whole Torah. The rest is commentary. Go and study it.”

Of course, within Christianity, we have this same story in a different flavor in the Gospel of Matthew, when the Sadducees approach Jesus asking him to tell them which is the greatest commandment in the Law. Jesus responds with what we affectionately call the Golden Rule: “The first and greatest commandment is, Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. And the second is like it, Love your neighbor as yourself. All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.”

Loving God and loving neighbor are the two most fundamental commandments that we have, and they are the core of First Peter’s admonitions to the struggling community of early Christians to whom the letter is written. They are the very first and foremost things that we learn in our fledgling faith, and that we strive to perfect from before we have speech to our twilight years of wisdom and experience. Beyond that, all the other things that we try to teach our children and one another like, “Isaac, don’t run in the parking lot!” or “No, Mallie, don’t bite the cat’s tail!” those things are all tied up in the other two rules when you boil it down.

Even when we grow up, and “don’t touch the hot stove” morphs into ever-ambiguous moral questions of lesser-evils or “do the ends justify the means?” and our appetite for truth becomes more complicated and complex, moving from mother’s milk to blue cheese and brie, we have tasted and seen that the Lord is good. As we say each week, “God is good, all the time. All the time, God is good.” We say it because when we strip everything else away, that single truth remains, that out of pure unchanging goodness God has loved us, and so we are called to love God and one another, letting go of envy and slander and malice, guilt, insincerity, and all the other responses that tear apart relationships instead of building mutual love.

As we grow in our faith, no matter how old we are or how mature we become in our spiritual journeys, we always remain like children seeking pure, spiritual milk, savoring the foundational truth of the Good News that the word of God’s love endures forever, a source and strength.

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2 http://www.jewfaq.org/brother.htm
3 Matthew 22:36-40
sustaining our mutual love for one another. Love God. Love one another. And all the rest is commentary. Amen.