

IT'S ALL ABOUT LOVE!

I John 4:7-12

God's love empowers us to love one another.

A sermon preached by
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There is often much wisdom on the comics page; it's the one part of the paper that I make sure to read every day. One year right before Mother's Day, Dennis the Menace was having a conversation with Margaret, the perfect little girl who lives in his neighborhood. He said to her, "I wonder what my mother would like for Mother's Day."

Margaret answered in her usual grown-up way: "Why don't you promise to go to bed when she tells you to—to keep your room cleaned up—to eat all your vegetables at dinner—even to brush your teeth after eating and to wash your hands before?"

Dennis scowled thoughtfully and replied, "No, I mean something practical."

That's what I want to do for you today—to give you something practical for Mother's Day, whether you're a mother or not. I want to give you something you can take with you as you leave here today that just might make a real difference in the practice of your life. What I want to share with you is *the* fundamental principle of Christian living. This is the foundation of everything else, and if you get this right, you can build a wonderful and effective life. Without it, nothing you can do will amount to much at all. So this is important.

In the First Letter of John, the author, the "beloved disciple" who wrote the Gospel of John, gives this basic principle that is repeated numerous times in the gospel and letters of John. Six simple words: "*Beloved, let us love one another.*"¹ That's the core and the key of the Christian life. Beloved—you who have received love—let us love one another. It's that simple. Get it, and you live. Miss it, and you die.

The 1999 movie *Tuesdays with Morrie*, based on the book by the same name, is the true story of a sports writer, Mitch Albom, and his reunion with his former college professor, Morrie Schwartz, who is dying of ALS (Lou Gehrig's disease). Albom is a multitasking workaholic, whose life is a series of hurried appointments, rushed phone

calls, and last minute sprints to catch a flight. When he discovers that his former college professor and friend is in the last stages of ALS, he honors a long-overdue promise to visit. The first visit becomes a series of weekly visits every Tuesday

In these visits, Morrie teaches Mitch some important lessons about what matters most in life. Morrie is sometimes patient with Mitch's superficiality, but one day Morrie confronts Mitch with some painful truths.

Morrie is very frail, and is lying in a recliner in obvious pain. He grimaces and asks Mitch to rub his aching feet with salve. "When we're infants," says Morrie, "we need people to survive; when we're dying, we need people to survive; but here's the secret: in between, we need each other even more."

Mitch nods and responds with a quote that he has heard Morrie say many times. "We must love one another or die."

Morrie loses patience with Mitch. "Yeah, but do you believe that? Does it apply to you?"

Mitch is stunned and defensive as he confesses that he doesn't know what he believes. The world he lives in doesn't allow for the contemplation of spiritual things.

Morrie pushes a little harder. "You hate that word, don't you—*spiritual*? You think it's just touchy-feely stuff, huh?"

"I just don't understand it," says Mitch.

"We must love one another or die," says Morrie. "It's a very simple lesson, Mitch."²

It is a very simple principle: let us love one another. But simple does not necessarily mean easy. Why is this so important, so crucial to our life as Christians? Love is the most important thing because love is the nature of God. If we are out of touch with love, we are out of touch with God. No love, no God; know love, know God. As our Scripture text says, "*Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love.*"³

Love in our hearts is a sign of our relationship with God. If we know what love is, we know who God is. The presence of love in our lives is a sign—a sign of our

relationship with God and a sign that we are in fact children of God. Listen to the way *The Message* puts it: “*My beloved friends, let us continue to love each other since love comes from God. Everyone who loves is born of God and experiences a relationship with God. The person who refuses to love doesn't know the first thing about God, because God is love—so you can't know him if you don't love. ...No one has seen God, ever. But if we love one another, God dwells deeply within us, and his love becomes complete in us—perfect love!*”⁴

When we see love in the world, we are seeing God at work. When we experience love in our lives, we are sharing in the Spirit of God. A few years ago, *Time* magazine had an article about a saint named Sister Emmanuelle—which of course means “God with us.” In 1979 she began a ministry among the “garbage-pickers” of Cairo, Egypt. Rising at 4:30 each morning, she begins her day as a loving, caring presence among the 10,000 people who live in the garbage dump and subsist by sifting through the trash of the city. The people of her community are the untouchables. They live in a vicious cycle of poverty, passing down their lifestyle to children and grandchildren, who also live in the dump. They sort through the refuse that is hauled in by donkey carts from the city, scavenging for bottles and cans and food to feed their pigs that roam freely through their makeshift homes.

But Sister Emmanuelle gathers the children every day to teach them to read. Christian, Muslim, non-religious, she takes them all in and gives them a vision of a wider world outside the dump. She walks around the dump, waving away the swarms of flies, carefully recording the needs of each family. She is gentle with the garbage-pickers, but she is tough as nails with officials and bureaucrats when she advocates for the poor. She told *Time* magazine: “My job is to prove that God is love, to bring courage to these people.

...I wouldn't want to be anywhere else because here I feel I am giving the life of Jesus Christ to the children."⁵

We prove God is love by loving one another. But how do we know such love? Where can we find a model, an example to show us the way? God has already taken care of that. He revealed his divine nature in his Son. "*For God so loved the world he gave his only Son.*"⁶ Jesus is the pattern; Jesus is the Word made flesh; Jesus is the way we understand divine love. As our Scripture text says, "*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. In 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.*"⁷

On the night before he died on the cross, at the Last Supper, Jesus gave his disciples one new commandment: "*...that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.*"⁸ It doesn't get much clearer than that, does it?

God's love comes before our love; he loves us first, and his love is completely unconditional. We do not deserve to be treated like this! But in our bleakest, darkest times, God stands beside us, and his love never fails.

In his book, *Searching for God Knows What*, Donald Miller shares a story of how he helped a friend who was battling alcoholism. The man was kind and brilliant and had many gifts from God, but alcohol was destroying his life and family. Don sat with him one night into the wee hours of the morning trying to talk some sense into him, but when he left to go back home, he wasn't sure he had helped at all.

After their conversation, the friend checked into rehab, and two months later he and Don Miller talked again. The friend had completed the program, and it had been several weeks since he had a drink. He told Don that one incident had given him the strength to continue his recovery. His father had flown in to attend a recovery meeting with him, and in the meeting the son had to confess all his issues and

weaknesses. He poured out his heart before his father and the group.

When he finished, his father stood up to address the group of addicts. He looked at his son and said, "I have never loved my son as much as I do at this moment. I love him. I want all of you to know I love him." Don's friend said at that moment, for the first time in his life, he was able to believe God loved him, too. He believed if God, his father, and his wife all loved him, he could fight this addiction, and he believed he might make it.⁹

So the agenda for the Christian life is set: love one another. As Christ has loved you, love one another. As God is love, love one another. And whenever you act in love toward one another, you are acting in love toward God. That means something. That makes a difference in the world.

The world was shocked last Sunday night by the news of the death of Osama bin Laden. I couldn't believe it at first, but as the reality began to sink in, I was relieved and glad that after 10 years, justice had finally been served. I hope this action provides some comfort and closure for the families of the victims of bin Laden's terrorism. I am proud of the bravery and excellence of our military personnel who carried out the mission.

Nobody in recent history has tested the limits of love like Osama bin Laden. Make no mistake about it, God loved Osama bin Laden. Osama responded with hatred and violence and a distorted, twisted faith. But God took no pleasure in his death. He only saw a child who had gone terribly wrong. Through Ezekiel the prophet, God said, "*As sure as I am the living God, I take no pleasure from the death of the wicked. I want the wicked to change their ways and live. Turn your life around! Reverse your evil ways!*"¹⁰ God only wants his children to come to him and learn to love.

We serve a Savior who said, "*Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.*"¹¹ Love does not allow us to dance

in the street to celebrate the death of Osama bin Laden. We are thankful that his reign of terror is over, but he is not our last enemy. We continue to remember the thousands of innocent people who lost their lives on 9/11 and their families. But we cannot rejoice in the violent, unrepentant death even of our enemy. Rather than dancing in the streets, we should be on our knees, praying for the safety of our citizens and our soldiers, repenting that we live in a world that is so broken by sin that sometimes justice can only be achieved through violence.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who based his program of social change on the principle of non-violence, until he was murdered by an assassin's bullet, once said, "Returning violence for violence multiplies violence, adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars. Darkness cannot drive out darkness: only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate, only love can do that."¹²

Only love can heal the brokenness of our world. Only love can turn back the tide of hatred. Our agenda is clear. God is love. Love God. Love one another. Live so the world sees God's love in you. On this Mother's Day of 2011, that is the most practical thing you can do. As you come to the Lord's Table today, remember: it's all about love. Amen.

¹ I John 4:7.

² *Tuesdays with Morrie* (Touchstone, 1999), produced by Oprah Winfrey and Kate Forte, directed by Mick Jackson.

³ I John 4:8.

⁴ I John 4:7-8, 12. Eugene Peterson, *The Message* (Colorado Springs:NavPress, 2002), p. 2227f.

⁵ From my sermon, "See God's Heart," May 1, 1994, no source given.

⁶ John 3:16.

⁷ I John 4:9-10.

⁸ John 13:34-35.

⁹ Donald Miller, *"Searching for God Knows What"* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2004), p. 130-131.

¹⁰ Ezekiel 33:11, *The Message*.

¹¹ Luke 6:27-28.

¹² Martin Luther King, Jr., *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?* (1967), <http://www.csmonitor.com/USA/2011/0117/Martin-Luther-King-Day-10-memorable-MLK-quotes/Hate-cannot-drive-out-hate>.