

December 13, 2020
John 1:1-14



Before I begin my message, I want to take a few moments and tell you about a project I am working on with four Disciples ministers from around the country. We are working on a sermon series for the new year based on a Celtic prayer. The series is titled *A New Year, A New Heart*. The prayer it is based on presents these themes, which will be the foundation of the messages – *Vision, Light, Wisdom, Courage, and Trust*. Here is the prayer –

*Lord of my heart, give me vision to inspire me,
that working or resting, I may always think of you.
Lord of my heart, give me light to guide me,
that at home or abroad I may always walk in your way.
Lord of my heart, give me wisdom to direct me,
that thinking or acting, I may always discern right from wrong.
Lord of my heart, give me courage to strengthen me,
that amongst friends or enemies, I may always proclaim your justice.
Lord of my heart, give me trust to console me,
that hungry or well-fed, I may always rely on your mercy.
Lord of my heart, save me from empty praise,
that I may always boast of you.
Lord of my heart, save me from worldly wealth,
that I may always look to the riches of heaven.*

*Lord of my heart, **save me from military prowess**,
that I may always seek your protection.
Lord of my heart, **save me from vain knowledge**,
that I may always study your word.
Lord of my heart, **save me from unnatural pleasures**,
that I may always find joy in your wonderful creation.
Heart of my own heart, whatever befall me,
rule over my thoughts and feelings, my words and actions.*

—Ray Simpson (Daily Light from the Celtic Saints: Ancient Wisdom for Modern Life)

It is a beautiful prayer and the sermon series based around it promises to be very interesting. We are also writing a curriculum and producing a video series for a study that will accompany it. In a recent Zoom meeting, I told the group I was thinking about having some kind of service to deal with all the grief of 2020, but at that time I had not yet figured out how to formulate the service. We talked about it, and we came up with what we are calling *A Requiem for 2020*. A Requiem is a funeral or memorial service, and after all the struggles and grief of 2020, it seemed to me that we should have a service to process all that grief in some way. Here's how you can help. If you have lost someone and would like their name added to a list that will be either printed or read, please let me know or contact the church office. You do not have to have your name listed if you choose not to do so. Also, if you have something you would like to add to the list, as far as another grief, let us know. By other griefs, I mean matters such as *those who have lost a job*. *Those who are worried about their children's future*. One item I will put on the list is *to have an open and loving heart*. I add that one because, to be honest, throughout this year I have too often felt myself closing off, trying to provide some measure of self-protection, I guess. And I offer this invitation not just to those who are part of our church. Please, anyone feel free to contribute to this service. If you are watching this, from wherever you are, please feel welcome to contribute. You can

put a comment in the comments section of this video, call our church office at 502-633-3345, or contact me directly.

Today is the third week of Advent, and as we continue through the season, I am preaching a series of messages titled *A Light in the Darkness*. The series is based on the Advent candles and their meaning – hope, peace, love, and joy. Today’s message is *love*, and our Scripture text is John 1:1-14. Follow along with me, as I read that passage –

¹ In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

² He was with God in the beginning.

³ Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made.

⁴ In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind.

⁵ The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

⁶ There was a man sent from God whose name was John.

⁷ He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all might believe.

⁸ He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light.

⁹ The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world.

¹⁰ He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him.

¹¹ He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him.

¹² Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God—

¹³ children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband’s will, but born of God.

¹⁴ The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

One of the dilemmas of preaching on the topic of love is, what is there to say that hasn’t already been said? Love is, I would imagine, the most written about topic in the history of mankind. As such, is there any

possibility of bringing a new insight or a new idea to the subject? Probably not.

But when writing or speaking about love, I don't think there is much need for originality. What we need, when writing or speaking about love, is the reminder that we have much work to do in living up to the ideal of love and what it asks of us.

The way I want to organize this message is to put love into three categories – *the reality of love*, *the challenge of love*, and *the promise of love*.

So let's look first at –

1. The Reality of Love

Love is one of those things on which everyone can agree. Love is, in fact, the one part of existence that universally unites humanity. Everyone. Can you think of anything else in human existence that unites us in the same way as love? I can't. But can we agree on how to define love, or why love actually exists, or even if love actually exists? I know that question sounds a bit odd, so I should explain what I mean by it.

One of the great contributions of the Christian view of love – out of the many contributions Christianity has made to the understanding of love – is that it is one of the greatest proofs of the existence of God. I say this because, to me, I'm not sure how we could truly believe in love if it were not for the existence of God.

To explain that statement, let me present my thinking in this way. In Western civilization, one of the greatest shifts in thinking took place during the Enlightenment. The Enlightenment covered the period of the 17th and 18th centuries and was the time of the scientific revolution. The scientific revolution brought some philosophers to the point of view of *materialism*. The definition of this type of *materialism* is not one of accumulating wealth and possessions, as we often define that term, but the belief that only what is *material* truly exists. This means only those things that can be seen, touched, and measured scientifically can truly exist. This, of course, rules out the metaphysical realm and also, any belief in God.

One of the great weaknesses of *materialism*, in my opinion, is that it does not take into account the full ramifications of what it teaches. Friedrich Nietzsche, a German philosopher and adamant atheist, was one of the few who truly understood the full ramifications of his belief, or lack of belief. Most materialists, at least in my experience, seem to continue holding to many of the concepts of Christianity – especially love – while also claiming that anything metaphysical cannot exist. I'm not sure how a *materialist* can prove that love exists. One might claim to see it, in some kind of expression from one person to another, but how do we know it is anything more than the release of a pleasurable chemical reaction in our brains, if there is nothing but the material? The release of those brain chemicals is quite pleasant and enjoyable, certainly, but there has to be something that grounds love in reality, and to me, that is God. Without God, I believe it is impossible to prove that love exists in any true form and is anything more than a biological reaction. In saying this, I am not proposing that people who do not believe in God cannot love; on the contrary, I believe the existence of God is what makes them – and anyone – able to truly love.

John understands the necessity of basing love in something that is real. In the first two verses of this morning's passage, John writes *¹In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ²He was with God in the beginning.* John affirms there is a divine beginning to all that we see. There was a beginning to this vast universe and that beginning came from the hand of God. This universe and all it contains – including each of us – is the product of divine action, and that divine action was motivated by love. The Scriptures remind us, remember, of the great affirmation that *God is love*. All that exists is a product and extension of God's love, so it then follows that all of life is based on love. If God does not exist, that is all pulled away, and the best one can say is that we are conditioned by evolution or culture to bind ourselves together in some way, but it cannot be called love, because love is far deeper and far more real than just the material.

2. The Challenge of Love.

For all the beauty of love, love is also a really, really great challenge, because it is not limited – at least not in the Christian sense – to a particular group. One of the difficulties of human love, however, is that it is at best a pale reflection of divine love. The arrival of Jesus into human history is both a reminder and a demonstration of how far we fall short of the agape love of God as demonstrated in Jesus.

The love of which Jesus spoke and demonstrated is for all people, even our enemies. We are called to love everyone. No exceptions. But when Jesus tells us to love our enemies, that is a general statement, and as a general statement, it is very difficult. But let's make it more specific, and thus more difficult. Let's put some names to those who would constitute our enemies. Maybe it's UK. Or UofL. Or, how about Duke! Wherever you come down on UK or UofL, we can all agree that Duke is the enemy! Right? What else can bring UK and UofL fans to agree? But do we really need to love Duke and Duke fans? Surely, Jesus didn't mean that! But let's go a bit further. This has been an interesting political year, so let's talk about political enemies. How about loving Mitch McConnell? How about loving Nancy Pelosi? How about loving Joe Biden? How about loving Donald Trump? Now, I am not naïve enough to be ignorant of the reality of political policy and what impact that policy can have on people, but neither am I ignorant of the words of Jesus to love our enemies. Those words are much more than a nice saying in the Bible. Those words are much more than something we say on Sunday morning in church. Those words are a very real command of Jesus, so before you finish that text or email to me telling me I don't know what I'm talking about, let me say this – I'm just the messenger! Let me also say, I really, really struggle with the command to love our enemies. Let me rephrase that. I really, really struggle with the command to love *my* enemies. I have been in ministry almost forty years, and I've got some bumps and bruises from those years. I've got the spiritual and soul equivalent of some broken bones and concussions. When Jesus tells me to love my enemies, there are some specific people that come to mind. I can see their faces. I can

recite their names. I can call up and feel the hurt I experienced from what they did to me. And I can go back far before ministry, and I can remember the faces and the names of classmates who humiliated me, and I can still feel how their words and actions cut deeply into my soul. After decades and decades, I still think about those times, and I still feel the emotions of humiliation and shame. And I open my Bible, and read Jesus saying, *love your enemies* (Matthew 5:44). Now, I don't like the idea of disagreeing with Jesus, but I will be honest and say that I've had more than one conversation with Jesus over the course of my lifetime about those three words. And no matter how many conversations I've had with Jesus about those three words, Jesus has yet to rescind that command.

That is one of the reasons why I really dislike the political, ideological, and religious purity that now exists, and that tells me I must separate myself from those who don't meet the purity tests of those who create those tests. That is, if people don't believe, or act, or vote, or talk – or meet any other litmus test – in a way of which they approve, then I should separate myself out from them and cut them out of my life. Now, I'm not recommending that anyone continue in a harmful or toxic situation. But I am saying that if we are going to love with the love of Jesus, we need to understand – we must understand – the challenge of that love. In accepting and meeting that challenge, we find that the love of Jesus is the key that unlocks the prison of hatred, and bitterness, and anger, and so much that crushes and harms our souls.

3. *The Promise of Love*

The greatest part of this morning's passage is, to me, verse 14, where John writes, *the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us*. Or, as it could be translated in a more literal fashion, *the Word become flesh and pitched his tent among us*. I really love that image – *pitched his tent among us*. The God of all creation. The God who created this vast, unending universe. The God who cast the stars and planets across billions of light years. That is the God who *pitched his tent among us*.

God did so because it was a way to say, *how about if I just come and show you what I mean about love?*

And God did that. God of all heaven and earth, born in a manger as a baby. The creator, walking the dusty roads of his created planet. And the God creator and lord of humanity, nailed to a cross by humanity, and from that cross said, *Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do* (Luke 23:34).

That, my friends, is love!