

WE LOVE BECAUSE GOD FIRST LOVED US

I John 4:7-21

A sermon by Larry R. Hayward on The Fifth Sunday of Easter, May 2, 2021, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia, during a time in which COVID restrictions were still limiting attendance.

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 know God, for 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. 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. Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us. By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit.

And we have seen and do testify that the Father has sent his Son as the Savior of the world. God abides in those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God, and they abide in God. So 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.

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; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. We love because he first loved us. Those 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. The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.

As we begin our phased comeback from COVID, we are ready to return to celebrating sacraments in our Sanctuary. You will experience this next week, when we will share the bread and wine of communion through safe, pre-packaged containers you will be given if you attend in person. Likewise, we have begun scheduling baptisms for the Sanctuary as well, and you will see or participate in those in the coming months. So with each flip of the calendar – with rising vaccinations and falling rates of infection – we are able to move toward ending this long period of separation among us as the people of God who worship in this warm and holy place.

Today I want to preach about one of these sacraments – baptism – in the context of a short series of sermons I am doing from the "First Epistle of John," a book that sits near the end of the New Testament, on a shelf in the back corner of the library we call the Bible.

I want to preach on one of my truly favorite verses and bring it to life in the context of baptism, which is where I first encountered it. The verse: "We love because God first loved us."

Let us pray: *O teach me Lord, that I may teach the precious things Thou dost impart; and wing my words, that they may reach the hidden depths of many a heart. In the name of Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.*

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On December 11, 1977, one of the coldest days in an unusually cold winter in New York, I walked across the street from the seminary where I lived and stepped into the crowded narthex of the Riverside Church, a Gothic cathedral built during the Depression by the Rockefellers for Dr. Harry Emerson Fosdick. Fosdick was facing

a trial for heresy before the Presbytery of New York City for not affirming the “Five Fundamentals”¹ – articles of faith for the Fundamentalist Movement sweeping American Protestantism at the time. He had resigned from his pulpit at First Presbyterian Church in Greenwich Village and needed a place to preach. The Rockefellers came through, and Fosdick preached at Riverside from 1930 to 1946.

The day I attended, a decade after Fosdick’s death, the place was packed. Limousines were parked near the front door and Secret Service stood in the building and on the sidewalks. The occasion was Human Rights Sunday, and the guest preacher was Dr. Andrew Young, a Methodist minister who was then the United States Delegate to the United Nations. Hence the official cars and Secret Service.

Arriving a few minutes after 11:00 a.m. – I was after all a student and never arrived early – an usher in a dark-suit stopped me at the door until he saw another usher, in a dark suit, motion from the far end of the center aisle near the chancel for me to come forward. I walked down the center aisle, which is about the length of a city block, and was seated in a folding chair on the center aisle that had been placed as part of a row of chairs in front of the front pew.

Following the Call to Worship, the choir sang as a choral response neither announced nor printed in the bulletin Handel’s *Messiah*.

I can still see and hear a tenor voice bringing that piece to life a few feet in front of me.

After the congregation was seated, a young couple came forward with a tiny infant dressed in a long, flowing white gown and were joined at the baptismal font by the minister.

The minister at the time was Dr. William Sloane Coffin, well-known in the 1960’s as the Chaplain at Yale University and leading voice at that time in opposition to the Vietnam War. Even a decade later, Coffin was like an athlete in his prime, about 6’6”, strapping frame, tousled hair, glasses never quite straight, wearing a long black pulpit robe that he appeared to throw onto his body racing down the corridors to the service. He spoke with a thick, booming New York accent that hardly needed a mic even in that great Cathedral.

From my box seat, I could almost reach out and touch the minister, the parents, and the baby. Not only did the minister tower over this tiny infant, wrapped in swaddling clothes against the cold New York morning, but far above him, under Gothic arches near the top of the cathedral, above its uppermost balcony, were people, who must have arrived even later and I, who were leaning over and peering down at the child. They looked like angels hovering over the child.

After administering the sacrament, the minister took the infant in his big, strapping arms, stepped to the center aisle even closer to my folding chair, and spoke directly to the infant:

Little child
[the minister said in his thick, New York accent],
For you Christ Jesus
Came into the world;
For you he did battle and suffered;
For you he endured the agony of Gethsemane

¹ According to George A. Marsden, in *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, (1980) p. 117, these five are Biblical inspiration and the infallibility of scripture as a result of this, Virgin birth of Jesus, belief that Christ's death was the atonement for sin, bodily resurrection of Jesus, and historical reality of the miracles of Jesus.

And the darkness of Calvary;
For you he cried, “It is finished.”
For you he died;
And for you he triumphed over death.
Yet you, little child,
Know nothing of this;
But thus is confirmed the word of the apostle:
“We love, because God first loved us.”²

Three years later, when I was ordained, I tried using these words in baptisms, but I rarely do any more, for I can barely look into a child’s eyes and say those words and keep my composure. But they have implanted themselves in my heart and in my theology: “We love – we love God, we love others, we are even able to love ourselves – because God first loved us.” An infant but a few weeks old cannot possibly have earned God’s love; but that love comes with birth: “We love, because God first loved us.”

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I have also shared with you one of the early baptisms I did in Houston, less than a decade after witnessing this Riverside baptism. A single mother from public housing near the church began attending, with her extraordinarily hyperactive four-year-old named J.T.

His initial stood for “Justin Thyme,” and his mother, a product of a Texas version of the counterculture, said, “I named him that because he came just in time.”

The sanctuary was a small theatre in the round, with a large open central space, which housed the Baptismal Font and Communion Table, Communion Table.

As his mother brought him down into the center, JT was “kicking against the goads,”³ when she set him down, he took off: under the Table (which was open); under the pulpit (which was also open); up around behind the choir; down a short aisle; back up another aisle. It took three men from the choir to retrieve him, and they brought him down and held him as I said the words and sprinkled the water over his head, which of course he also didn’t like. I don’t know if there is such a thing as “forced baptism,” but this one would qualify.

Several years ago, I shared with you, that sitting in my office before worship, checking email, I got an email from the mother. “I wanted to write you to let you know that a few years after you left, doctors found that the problem with JT was an inner ear issue that they corrected with surgery. He has still struggled all his life: ADD, learning issues, us not having much money, me being in and out of treatment. But we still live near the church, and they have treated us so well, and at age thirty-four, he is being confirmed today.”

Whatever difficulties his mother has, whatever difficulties JT has, they love God, they love one another, they are loved by a church of Jesus Christ – all because God first loved them.

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A few years later in that church, there was a young couple – from New Jersey and Oklahoma I believe – expecting their first child. One night at a local take-out restaurant I saw the father and I said: “You all are

² This liturgy originated with the Reformed Church in France. There are various versions of it.

³ Acts 26:14.

having a final party tonight before the baby is born?” “He said, ‘No, she came this morning, early, and she is in NICU downtown.’”

Over the next few weeks, whenever I went to visit in the NICU, one of the parents was always present. I saw them every three or four days though it was a long drive in one of the most spread-out cities of the country. For about six weeks the reports varied: sometimes hopeful, sometimes not. We talked about baptizing her, but they wanted to wait until she was better, so they could baptize in the sanctuary, the same spot where JT had been baptized.

But one Sunday night about midnight I got a call: “You better come down.”

When I got there: “We better baptize her.”

I took a Styrofoam cup from a cupholder and filled it with water from a gooseneck faucet near the baby’s crib, and they held her, and I administered that holiest of water: “I baptize Thee in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.”

An hour later a nurse again lifted the baby into their arms, and I held them as they held her as the line on the monitor went flat. The next day I went with them to shop for a gravesite. I will never forget the young father pulling a credit card out of his wallet and looking at his wife with a private, quizzical look, as if to say: “Is there enough room on this card to pay for this?”

Over the years, I’ve thought long and hard about this baptism, and what the verse illumines concerning it. The infant lived far too short, struggled the whole time for life, always wrapped in tubes and surrounded by high tech machinery and nurses and parents. There were times she was awake; times of slight hope; times, I assume, of consciousness on her part; times, I assume of dreams. But there was always a parent at her side, and usually a nurse as well.

Hers was not a long life, but a life in which, when she was conscious, she had to be aware of the care surrounding her, from nurses and doctors, from mother and father, even from tubes and machinery. In some ways, all she knew in her short life from others was love. And she drew out every ounce of love her young parents had to give, and more.

We always search for reasons for life and death, particularly when death cuts short a life far too early. We can never fully know the reason for death, her death, but perhaps the reason for her life was to live a life surrounded by love; to bring out the utmost of love within others, love we all have only because God first loved us.

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A final story:

A mentor I had with whose son I had gone to school was a white-haired, gravelly-voiced Presbyterian pastor who had had his first heart attack at age 49 and several thereafter. He had more than a decade earlier served as Pastor of First Presbyterian Church in Starkville, Mississippi, a college town, when James Meredith integrated the University of Mississippi in Oxford, another college town. Like so many ministers in the South who supported integration, he had had to resign from his pulpit in Starkville.⁴

⁴ See R. Milton Winter, “Division & Reunion in the Presbyterian Church, U.S.: A Mississippi Retrospective,” *Journal of Presbyterian History*, 78:1 Spring 2000, pages 67-86.

Bob Walkup was an orphan, raised along with his twin brother by their grandparents when their parents were killed. *He* became a Presbyterian Minister; *his brother*, a physician and Presbyterian Elder. Though they came out of the same birth canal only moments apart, as adults they wrestled like Jacob and Esau over everything in their lives, including the question of the day: “Are Black people and White people equal?”

It was an awkward family reunion one summer; more awkward than others, but despite being well-mannered Southerners, after exchanging heated words at the dinner table, they agreed to step outside – to exercise that other staple of Southern culture – the code of honor. Instead of engaging in what that phrase usually means, they went for a walk. A long walk. They reminisced about their parents. They reminisced about their grandparents. They reminisced about the church they attended. Even in their reminiscences their memories varied considerably. They never stopped being Jacob and Esau.

When they talked about their differences – particularly the difference that had led them to step outside in the first place – they decided that the most significant thing they had in common was their baptism. They were baptized on the same day, in the same church, by the hands of the same minister, with the same water, presented by the same now late parents. Whatever love they had come to know and express in their lives – one for patient, the other for parishioner – they had come to know because God had first loved them.

When they returned to the reunion, still Jacob and Esau, they were able to mingle, and at least for the remainder of that day, the reunion had a measure of peace.

I do not know whether the one brother’s love moved the other brother – however reluctantly – to an affirmative answer to the question that divided them. Many of their generation were moved by the love of God expressed through the love of someone else to come to *see* and *say* that all people are created “in the image of God.” Many were able to move beyond justification sealed in their baptism to the sanctification that follows and to live toward and out of that love. But many were not.

Whatever love we have, or think we have, or aspire to have, “We love because God first loved us.”

That love is always active, drawing us to God, drawing us to other people, drawing us to *change*. The religious word for that change is *repentance*.

This whole process – justification, repentance, sanctification – is what our baptism signifies and seals.

It leads us to love, which starts because God first loved us.

Amen.