

## “Love First”

### *What’s the Point, part #1*

1 John 4:7-12

[37] Good morning. It is so good to be back with you. As we begin, take a look around you. Make eye contact with the people beside you, in front of you, and behind you. The people around you love you, appreciate you, and are here to worship God with you. I don’t know how you felt when you woke up this morning – excited, tired, grumpy? Maybe it took you a few cups of coffee to get going. I want you to know, you are in the right place this morning. You are not here by accident. Your presence matters, to me, to us, and to God.

Would you please pray with me? Lord, if you have something to tell us this morning, we are ready to listen. Look through us, test our hearts, and show us anything we need to change. We love you, Jesus. Amen.

Do you have someone in your life you truly love and care about? Sure, we all have those relationships. And I’ll bet if we sat down for a cup of tea (or, if you prefer, coffee), you’d all have some pretty good stories about how you met some of your best friends.

[38] There is one person whom I have loved that I want to tell you about this morning. Her name was Annie. I’ll put a few pictures on the screens for you. Annie was my father’s first client at his new veterinary office when I was 2 years old. [39] One day, she drove up to my dad’s office, before it was open. Picture if you will, a 30-year-old doctor in 1970’s bell-bottom overalls, covered in sweat and paint, furiously trying to open a brand new clinic. And up drives this short, bright-eyed, 60-year old lady, with her little Schnauzer. My dad was mortified that he’d lose his first customer before he even started! “We’re not open, we’re not open.” He waved his hands frantically. Annie just calmly took him in with a glance and said, “That’s all right. I was just curious to meet my dog’s new doctor. I wanted to see what he looked like.”

[40] Annie ended up adopting us. She was there for my brother’s birth and medical issues. She was there when my parents separated and reunited. We watched as her husband passed away and left her with no family. No children. No brothers, no sisters. Just us. She became my mom’s best friend and traveled to over a dozen countries around the world with her. Annie was a saint, a regular

prayer warrior. When we went to church, it just wasn't the same unless we sat next to her and hugged her. The night that she died, with my parents in her home, she said to my mom, “Don't worry about me. Go be with your husband.”

Annie was always there for us and always cared for us. She put others first. Annie showed us unconditional love.

[41] I want to ask you this morning, do you have people in your life like Annie? Important, loving relationships? Go ahead, name them. (Pause) We are so blessed to know these friends, these family members.

[42] There is one relationship that rises above them all. If there is one thing you remember this morning, this is it: Together, you and God form the most important love relationship of your life. I'll repeat that: Together, you and God form the most important love relationship of your life. Take your bulletin, and draw a big heart on it. In the middle of that heart, write God + Me and the number 1.

God's love is everything, and it doesn't replace other relationships, it enhances them. Just as knowing Annie's love taught me about love, respect, and understanding people from an older generation, knowing God's love has helped me to understand other people. It has helped me understand myself.

There are lots of places in the Bible where we can learn about God's love, but I'm going to focus on just a short passage this morning. It comes from I John 4:7-12 (NIV).

[43] <sup>7</sup> *Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God.* <sup>8</sup> *Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love.* [44] <sup>9</sup> *This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him.* <sup>10</sup> *This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.* [45] <sup>11</sup> *Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.* <sup>12</sup> *No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.*

The word “love” is mentioned 13 times in this one paragraph. That's a lot of love. It's like the author, John, is trying to tell us something.

[46] Now, the Greek word for love is “agape”. Agape love is known by its action. It is a self-giving love. An unconditional love. An “others first” love. It is

the same love I saw Annie give to us. It is the love of God, the love from God, which motivates us for everything else. It is foundational.

God and you form the most important love relationship of your life. God’s love is everything and is the basis for everything we do as a church.

[47] That’s all fine and good. OK, so God loves us, and we love God. This isn’t rocket science or civil engineering. Maybe some of you are now asking, “So what? So what, preacher? If we love God, so what?”

Every time I give a message, I want you to know, without a doubt, that there is something God is asking us to do in response. If you ever leave this service and are confused about what choice you need to make, if you spend 20 minutes listening and are unsure of what to do, you have my permission to call me on Monday morning (please wait at least to Monday!) and say, “I didn’t get it.” Do we have a deal?

[48] God loves us. So what? My response to you is also a question. What would this community look like, if everyone knew a loving relationship with God? What would this world look like if everyone realized that the most important love relationship of their life is with God? What would our work places, our homes, our schools, our neighborhoods, our churches look like if everyone knew that their Creator loved them and wanted their own relationships to reflect his love? Would this world look different?

If you agree with me that the world would be radically different, then the answer to the “so what” question is, what are you willing to do about it? We know that relationships take time and attention. I believe that by giving our love relationship with God the time and attention it deserves, we will make our current relationships better. And we will create new loving relationships as well.

[49] Understand, this love of God is crucial to everything we do as a church. If there is one question that every member of this congregation should be asking, it is “How is what we are doing with showing the love of God to the world?” We are here to connect, inspire, commit, and serve. The United Methodist church exists to “make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.” The thing is, love makes all things grow. Love transforms us. You know. You’ve seen it. Love makes you do some crazy things. Ask any guy out there, what did you do for your girlfriend when you fell in love with her? I know I did some pretty hokey

stuff. And I did some really cool stuff, too. The night I asked Katja to marry me, I arranged for a fancy dinner (which she didn't want to eat), a horse-drawn carriage ride (which she didn't want to do), and I hid her diamond ring in a chocolate egg (which she didn't want to eat.) I spent months planning this evening, and even though everything seemed to go wrong, she still said, “Yes.” That right there proves there is a God.

[50] 1<sup>st</sup> John 3:1 says, “Behold what manner of love the Father has given unto us, that we should be called children of God.” This is a song my Sunday School teachers taught me. The author of 1 John is saying, “Wow! God's love for us is amazing!” Do you feel that way, too? I hope you do, because God's love is amazing. There is no other way to put it. God sent his only Son for us, to prove his love for us, to prove that nothing, not even death, can stop his love from breaking through. And in return, God offers to us a choice to love him, and share his love with others.

[51] Still, there's another issue. Maybe you've heard this all before. You already know God. Yet your relationship with God is not static, at least, it shouldn't be. Your relationship changes. It is constantly renewed. When I go home to see my parents, I don't say, “That's all right. Don't hug me. We've already hugged last year.” On the contrary, no matter what, I am still their child. And we remember that by exchanging words of affirmation and hugs. Just as I can renew my relationship with my family, so we can renew our relationship with God.

[52] The Bible tells us, God loved us first. Romans 5:8 says, “God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.”

Love causes us to go to great lengths to show affection to others. Love...agape...means having the other's best interests in mind. It is a self-giving, self-sacrificing, unconditional love. Jesus is the ultimate expression of God's love.

[53] So let me make a deal with you. If you will agree that you and God form the most important love relationship of your entire life, if you will agree that God's love is the foundation of everything we will ever do as a church, will you explore with me five aspects of that relationship? Over the next five weeks we will discover what that love relationship can look like. I'm going to use some

church buzzwords to help explore this relationship. Words like: worship, fellowship, discipleship, ministry, witness. God's love reveals the purpose of life, and the foundations of what it means to be a Christian. You can use this as an excuse to invite someone to church. "Hey, our pastor wasn't half bad last Sunday, and he's talking about love and relationships the next five weeks."

(sing) "Behold what manner of love the Father has given unto us, that we should be called the children of God." Whoa. Me? A rebel? A sinner? Unworthy to even be God's servant? And God, through Jesus, calls me his child? Yes, Jesus loves me. I want to know more about God's love. And I'm betting you do, too.

Let's pray.

**Memory Verse:**

Romans 5:8 - "God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us."

**Reflection questions:**

1. Name something in your current relationships for which you are grateful. Name one thing you wish you could improve.
2. Have you considered how much God loves you? When was the first time that you realized God loved you?
3. I John 4:8 says, whoever does not love, does not know God. Is this exclusively true, or are there exceptions?
4. What is one way you can show God's love to someone this week?

*Based on Rick Warren's "The Purpose-Drive Life", 2002, with Doug Fields Youth Ministry resources.*