

## **Sermon: God is Love (The God I Hope You Know)**

We have lots of questions about God. What is God like?

The best way to answer those questions is to look at Jesus. Jesus reveals to us what God is like.

Jesus even said, “If you have seen me, you have seen the Father.”

The God I hope you know is the God that Jesus revealed. This God is good and generous, trustworthy and just. And the God I hope you know is love.

God is love. That sounds familiar. Who said God is love? The apostle John. In the very back of your Bible there are three short letters of the New Testament written by John with very technical names: 1<sup>st</sup> John, 2<sup>nd</sup> John, 3<sup>rd</sup> John.

In 1<sup>st</sup> John, chapter 4, he writes: “Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God. Why? Because God is love.”

God is love. That is a remarkable statement. It is an equation, a formula, a truth. John is saying that for God, love is not a passing sentiment. It is who God is.

Love is not something that comes and goes based on feelings. Love is who God is. God

is love. It is God's essential nature. God cannot be unloving because God is love.

Then John applies it to us. Because God is love, we are to love one another. Whoever does not love, does not know God because why? Because God is love.

One day my office phone rang and I answered it. Sounded like a young woman. She asked, "I have just one question. May I come to your church?"

I was stunned. I said to her. "Of course you can come to this church. Why would you feel like you need to ask?"

She said, "Let me tell you my story before you answer my question."

I sat down to listen. When she was a junior in high school, she got pregnant. The young man had no interest in her or the baby. She kept the baby and decided to get her life back on track. She started attending the church she was raised in.

After a few months, she had a talk with her pastor. She thought that other girls could learn from her mistakes, so she offered to talk with the middle school girls about the pressures of dating and sex. The pastor told her, "I would never allow that here. I am afraid your type of person would rub off on them."

She was hurt, but she kept going to the church.

After her baby was born, she called the pastor to schedule a baptism service for the baby. The pastor said, "That is not going to happen in my church. I would never baptize an illegitimate baby."

She told me on the phone, “Now that you know my story, can I come to your church?”

I think Jesus will have a few words with that pastor. Whoever does not love, does not know God because God is love.

In the book of 1<sup>st</sup> John, it is also written: “See what great love God has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God. And that is what we are.”

God lavishes God’s love on us. God calls us God’s children. And it is true. That is what we are, who we are.

Before you are anything else, you are a child of God. God knows you as God’s child.

If you have children, do you love them? Crazy love, right? You do anything for your kids, you’d die for your kids.

One of our members was telling me just a few Sundays ago about her son, that he was going to have a very complicated difficult surgery. She told me that she wished she could take his place and bear his surgery so he would not have to suffer. That is how we love our children.

God loves you like parents love their children. Absolutely committed to your well-being and always doing what is best for you.

I hope you believe that. I hope that is the God you know.

We can rely on God. The word “rely” translates in the Biblical Greek to believe or trust. We rely and believe and trust in God’s love for us.

How many of us know that God loves us as God's own child? How many of us believe in God's love? We say we believe in God's love, but do we embody it? Do we act like it?

On Tuesday, I drove over to visit my friend Terry in his office. While we were visiting, Terry made this little off the cuff comment about God's love that struck me odd, especially based on writing this particular sermon. His comment stayed with me, so I called Terry later in the week to ask about what he said. This is what he told me. I have his permission to tell you.

Terry has been struggling with depression. I mean struggling. He has gone to a good counselor. Not long ago, the counselor pointed out that although Terry said he knows that God loves him, he does not act like it. He knows, but he does not seem to believe it. Terry admitted that he was acting like God would love him only if he was good enough. Only if he did all the right things. And if Terry did not do it right, God would not love him.

Does this sound familiar? Many of us believe the same thing. God loves us when we are good and rejects us when we are not good.

The Bible reminds us (Romans 5:8) how God demonstrates God's love for us, like this: "While we were still sinners, Christ died for us."

When did God demonstrate God's love for us? While we were sinners.

My friend Terry's counselor pointed out that believing the truth will set him free, but it is a battle at times to believe.

We can relate, right? We have these entrenched beliefs, big mental roadblocks that have to be broken down and replaced with the truth. This particular mental block, that love must be earned or deserved, is pervasive because we have grown up in a culture where acceptance is based on performance. We naturally assume that God is like that, too.

But God is not like that. We are on different ground with God. God is love. God loves you not because of anything you do, but because God is love. Your love from God comes not from what you do, but from who God is.

Terry has been working on tearing down that mental block. He calls it rejecting a lie, the lie that he has to perform to be loved.

It is always a fun thing to explain grace to someone who is not Lutheran. To explain the idea of undeserved love. Terry is getting it. He's too much of a Baptist to be a Lutheran, but he can believe like a Lutheran, live like a Lutheran in God's grace.

Terry is believing that God loves him, just as he is. That he is valued by God as God's child, for who he is, not what he does.

Do you know and do you believe that God loves you right now? Always tell yourself the truth about God's love.

God is love. God loves you more than you can imagine. But what does that mean? We use the word love to mean all kinds of things.

Love is doing what is best for another, no matter what it costs you. I have always liked

this definition. Love is doing what is best for another, no matter what it costs you.

To break it down: Love is doing. Love is not mere emotion, love is action.

Jesus commands us to love. Love God, love your neighbor, love your spouse and kids, love your enemies. God is not commanding us to feel something. Because you cannot command feelings.

Love me!! Did that work? Yeah, didn't think so.

You can only command action, not feeling. And love is an action. Love is doing.

Love is doing what is best for another. To be committed to their wellbeing. To want and to do the very best for them.

This is why love sometimes will say no. This is why love does not enable harmful behavior. This is why parents discipline. Love does what is best for another.

Love is doing what is best for another no matter what it costs you. Love is costly. Love involves sacrifice and service and is sometimes painful, even difficult. Love is doing what is best for another, no matter what it costs you.

I once heard a preacher say that God's love is God's unconquerable goodwill towards you. I like that, God's unconquerable goodwill towards you.

God wants what is best for you and God has gone to incredible lengths to make that happen,

No remember that verse from 1<sup>st</sup> John where John says that God is love and then proves it by pointing to Jesus? What about Jesus says that God is love? Everything. His words, his actions, his death on the cross. Everything about Jesus shows that God is love.

Jesus loved everyone always. He did what was best for each person. He healed, he freed, he restored, he taught and most of all, he gave his life. Jesus showed that God is love through his words, his actions and ultimately, his death.

While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. Jesus' death was the ultimate expression of God's love.

Dear church, I want you to know and believe that God loves you deeply. I want you to believe that God wants the very best for you. I want you to have an unshakeable faith in God's unconquerable goodwill toward you.

Now, remember the story I told you at the beginning of this sermon, about the young lady whose pastor rejected her offer to help the teenage girls of her church and how the pastor refused to baptize her baby?

She ended up in our church. I invited her that day on the phone. This church welcomed her and her daughter with open arms.

And I hope and believe that she learned here, experienced here, that God loved her. Her baby was baptized. We asked her to work with our young people. She went on to finish her education. She went with us on a mission trip to Mississippi after Hurricane Katrina where we were building houses for Habitat for Humanity. A few of you were on that trip.

She was energized about sawing and nailing and building Habitat houses. It gave her a purpose.

She and her daughter now live in Americus, Georgia where she is an executive with Habitat for Humanity.

She says that her job keeps her in the Habitat administrative offices more than she likes, but her greatest joy is still going to the building site, especially working with mission trips and volunteers, because she was there once. And she says that she always, always tells people that there is a God who loves everyone. Everyone.

God is love. This is the God I hope you know.