

FIFTH SUNDAY OF EASTER | APRIL 28, 2024

ACTS 8:26-40 | PSALM 22:25-31 | 1 JOHN 4:7-21 | JOHN 15:1-8

We're spending some time this Easter season thinking about what Easter changes. What's now possible that wasn't possible before? What's different on this side of the resurrection?

There's an old Greek saying that "the fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing." Some of the authors of scripture are foxes. St. Paul, for example, will bounce from topic to topic. Marriage. Food. Holiness. Baptism. Lawsuits. Chloe's people. You can barely keep up.

The author of 1 John, on the other hand, is a hedgehog. They know one big thing. And the entire letter of 1 John is just getting at that one subject from a bunch of different angles. And the big idea that they're talking about is a simple one. It's this. God is love. No matter what question you ask, no matter what topic is at hand, they have the same answer: God is love.

The idea that "God is love" sounds kind of reductive and simplistic. Better suited for a bumper sticker than a Bible study. But 1 John has a different take on it. The love that is God isn't just my love but bigger. It's a different kind of love altogether.

Our love tends to be reactive. We love things that make us feel a certain way. We see a painting that we like and we say, "I love that painting." We hear a song that reminds us of a fond memory, and we think, "I love this song." We spend time with a friend who has always been there for us, and we say, "I love this person." Our love responds to the world around us.

But God's love is creative. It doesn't just respond to the world that is, it actually generates something new. As 1 John puts it, "We love because [God] first loved us." God's love isn't something that we earn by behaving a certain way or following a certain set of rules or praying a certain way or even doing lots of admirable things in our lives. God doesn't love us because we're lovable. We're lovable because God loves us. God loves us not because of what we do but because of who God is.

We see that primarily in the life and ministry of Jesus. If you happened to be here last week, we talked about how the ministry of Jesus shows us what God is like. What is God's love like? It's like a father who runs to greet his prodigal son. It's like a leper being embraced. It's like being restored to life in community.

Jesus's incarnation makes the love of God visible in the world. Jesus doesn't look at the world around him and say, "I'm going to love the people that make me feel good." Jesus loves people and creates a new set of relationships.

And here's where Easter comes in. Because the author of 1 John suggests that something is different after Easter. There was a time during the life of Jesus, when you could point people, literally point people, to Jesus. So if you were a disciple and someone asked you what the love of God was like, you could point to Jesus—the flesh and blood historical Jesus—and say, "That's what the love of God looks like." You can see him right over there.

But after Jesus's resurrection and ascension, Jesus is no longer visible to us in the same way. We can't see God. We can't see Jesus. So how can we encounter the love of God?

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The author of 1 John has an answer. And it's the same answer they give to every question which is: God is love. So when you share the love of God with your neighbor, when you act lovingly without precondition or expectation, you make God visible to your neighbor. To use Luther's image, we can't see Jesus, but we can live as little Christs to our neighbors. We can't see God. But we can make God visible for others.

There's an old story in one of Catherine of Siena's dialogues that gets at this idea in a memorable way. She's having a conversation with God during prayer. And God says, this is paraphrasing, "You know, Catherine, you should love me like I love you." And Catherine agrees and says that makes sense. But then God goes on, "Except that won't really work. Because I loved you before you loved me. And so you'll never be able to love me the way I love you." And Catherine replies, "Okay, so what am I supposed to do then?" And God replies, "This is why I have put you among your neighbors: so you can do for them what you cannot do for me—that is, love them without any concern for thanks and without looking for any profit for yourself."¹

In other words, you can never love God the way God loves you. God loved you first. But you can love other people the way God loves you. You can love others without concern for thanks or profit. And in so doing, you can make the love of God a tangible reality in their lives.

This is what the author of 1 John is talking about when they talk about perfecting the love of God. The love of God is not perfected when we love God the way God loves us. That can't happen. But the love of God is perfected when we love others the way God loves us.

Perfecting the love of God doesn't mean that we always do things perfectly. We don't. Or that we love everyone the way we should. We don't. Or that we are as charitable in our judgements of others as our judgements of ourselves. We're not. To perfect the love of God means that we extend the gracious love of God outward from ourselves. God's great love that we encounter in the sending of Jesus doesn't end on Easter. It continues when the Holy Spirit empowers us to convey God's creative love into the world.

After all, God is love, the author of 1 John says. And adopted as God's children, we can make that love visible to all the world. Not just living in the world as it is but serving together to build God's new creation.

Joseph Schattauer Paillé, Pastor

¹ Saint Catherine (of Siena), *The Dialogue* (Paulist Press, 1980), 121.