

## EASTER 5B – April 29, 2018

### *All We Need Is Love*

(1 John 4:7-21)

I know I'm going to be dating myself here. (After all, I just turned 62!) But, who cares, I just can't help it. As soon as I looked at this morning's reading from 1 John the first thing, the *very* first thing, that I thought of was that iconic rock group from the 1960's, the Beatles; specifically the hit song from their Yellow Submarine album, "All You Need Is Love."

In fact, from the moment I began working on this sermon, I couldn't get that song out of my mind! I kept hearing it over and over in my head, like it was on a never-ending loop, or something.

And just so you *too* can know what that feels like; here, let me play a short audio clip of it for you this morning...

**(Play audio clip)**

There! I defy you to go home this afternoon and *not* hear this song playing over and over and over again in your *own* heads!

It was John Lennon, of course, who wrote it. And it was first performed by the Beatles as part of a worldwide TV special during the summer of 1967; a summer that, ironically enough, became known thereafter as the "*Summer of Love*."

But, you see, John Lennon, the Beatles' poet laureate was not the first person to ever express such a sentiment. Not by a long shot. As we just heard this morning, some 18 centuries or so *before* Lennon, there was another John – whether this was indeed the apostle John, as early tradition and some today still hold, or just an unknown teacher in the Johannine tradition. We don't really know. But he *is* known to us, however, by the name of the letter he wrote – 1 John.

And just like his namesake, with the mop-top haircut and electric guitar, *this* John also preached a message of love. In fact, in the 15 verses that make up today's reading, some form or variation of the word "love" appears a total of 29 times. *29 times!* And that's taking into consideration the fact that, in 3 of those 15 verses, the word "love" doesn't appear at all! In other words, in the remaining 12 verses, the word "love" appears a total of 29 times: 15 times as a verb, 12 times as a noun, and the remaining 2 times as an adjective. Apparently a key word, wouldn't you say?

But here's the problem. For those of us old enough to remember the Beatles and perhaps even that so-called "summer of love," or all the rest of us who have simply been influenced by our modern understandings and definitions of love, the idea that "all we *need* is love" sounds suspiciously like some sappy, sugary-sweet slogan that has no practical application or relevance in the real world. As in, "just love each other and everything will be okay." In other words, just another pie-in-the sky platitude...

Yet nothing could be further from the truth. In fact, the simple message that "all we need is love" is probably the most profound theological concept in the entire Bible!

And here's why. Our reading this morning opens with this: "Beloved (here's the word "love" as an adjective, think "beloved *one*") "let us love (now as a verb) one another because love (a noun) is from God; everyone who loves (as a verb again) is born of God and knows God." But here's the clincher, in verse 8: "Whoever does not love (verb), does not know God, for God *is* love (once again, a noun)."

*God... is love.* It's that simple, yet profound.

But before we go on to automatically picture God as some kind, old, grandfatherly figure – just think Santa Claus without the beard and red

suit – we have to stop for a moment and consider just what *kind* of love we’re talking about here.

As a pastor once pointed out to me many years ago, the Greeks were a lot wiser than we are; because, whereas we have only a *single* word for love, the Greeks actually had four. First, there was *eros*, or the most intimate kind of love. And one, therefore, that we typically have for someone especially *worthy* of that love. Then, there was *storge*, or familial love, as in the love between a parent and a child. Interestingly enough, as far as I know, *neither* of these two Greek words for love appears anywhere in scripture, however.

Third, there was *philos*, or the affection we typically have for a close friend. Thus, when you take the word *adelphos*, for example, or “brother,” and this word *philos*, meaning “love,” and then put them together you have the word “Philadelphia.” Or, as you probably know it, the city of “brotherly love.”

Now *this* word for love, *does* appear in the Bible. But it’s not the word for love in this morning’s reading, though. Not in any of those 29 instances where the word “love” is used in that passage.

Instead, the word for love, in each one of these 29 instances, is some form or variation of the Greek word *agape*. This love, in sharp contrast to the kind of love we have for those who deserve it, or the kind of love we have for family or friends; *this* love... is intentional love, sacrificial love, *unconditional* love. A love, therefore, even for the one who is *unworthy*; that is, who *doesn’t* deserve it. In short, the kind of love that God has demonstrated for us in Jesus Christ.

And exactly what kind of love was that? Well, quite frankly, the kind of love that was demonstrated for us on the cross.

You see, so often when you or I say, “I love,” what we *really* mean is that the recipient of our love – that person or thing – is worthy of it,

or deserves it, or has somehow *earned it*. But when the word *agape* is used in the Bible, it is used in the context of *unworthiness*; and in those instances where it is both *unearned* and *undeserved*.

Verses 9 and 10, then, make this crystal clear: “God’s love was revealed among us in *this* way (we read); God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. Verse 10: “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.”

It was February 1941 in Auschwitz, Poland. Maximilian Kolbe was a Franciscan priest who had been put in that infamous death camp for helping Jews escape Nazi terrorism.

In desperation, an escape had taken place. So, in retaliation, the Nazi guards responded by randomly choosing ten people who would be herded into a cell where they would die of starvation and exposure as a lesson against any *future* escape attempts.

Names were called. A Polish Jew, Frandishek Gasovnachek, was one of them. He cried out and pleaded, “Wait! I have a wife and children!”

Upon hearing this, Father Kolbe stepped forward and said, “I will take his place.” So he was marched into that cell with the nine others, where he died six months later.

Some years ago, this story was chronicled on an NBC news special. Gasovnachek, by this time 82 years old, was shown telling this story while tears literally streamed down his cheeks. A mobile camera then followed him around his little white house until they reached a marble monument carefully tended with flowers. The inscription on the monument read: “In Memory Of Maximilian Kolbe. He Died In My Place.”

You see, every day that Frandishek Gasovnachek had lived since 1941, he had lived with the sobering, humbling, knowledge that, as he put it, "...someone *died* for me." And so each year, on August 14<sup>th</sup>, the day that Maximilian Kolbe died, Gasovnachek would travel to Auschwitz in memory of the one who willingly sacrificed his own life so that Gasovnachek's might be spared.

That, of course, is what Jesus Christ did for you and me... for all of us; sacrificed his own life so that we might live – as I pointed out last week. Therefore, says John, "Beloved, since God loved us *so much*, we also ought to love one another." In other words, an example has been set for us; a new way of loving and living has been demonstrated; and in a very real and practical way.

And so the image, the picture if you will, that we *now* should have of God is not that of a jolly old grandfather-type, who smiles down on us benignly. But rather the image of a God who comes to us in the form of a suffering servant; of a poor, itinerant rabbi, innocent yet put to death – a hideous, painful death – on the cross... *That's* the image of God we now must have. And that's the image of God's love, as well...

John, then goes on to remind us that, if we love one another – again, *agape* love; that sacrificial, intentional, unconditional kind of love – then God lives *in us*; abides in us, and that we abide in God...

Then we come to verse 19, and the reminder that "We love because *he* (God) first loved us." Followed by verse 20, "Those who say, 'I love God,' and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars..." Why? As John puts it, "...for those who do not love a brother or a sister whom they *have* seen, cannot love God whom they have *not* seen."

The bottom line, then, is really quite simple, as John indicates in verse 21, the final verse of our reading, "The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters *also*."

A commandment, mind you, not a suggestion. Love, in other words, is an *expectation*... It's not optional. No exceptions. If you want to love God, if you *say* that you love God, then you have no other choice but to love others... whether they deserve your love or not; *in fact*, especially because they *don't* deserve it – ever!

Agape love, biblical love, *God's* way of loving, then, is downright counter-intuitive to us, and to our normal way of thinking. *We* are much more inclined to love the loveable, not the *unlovable*. Yet that's precisely what *God* has done, and now asks of us...

Some years ago, a man by the name of Kent Keith wrote a piece entitled “The Paradoxical Commandments,” the first of which was this: “People are illogical, unreasonable, and self-centered... *Love them anyway.*”

That's precisely what the writer of 1 John is trying to impress upon us as well. Love is not reserved for those who deserve it. Rather, love is extended to all unconditionally; just as we have been unconditionally loved by God...

During the Revolutionary War; more precisely, during that long, dreadful winter at Valley Forge, a British sympathizer by the name of Michael Wittman was arrested and accused of treason, found guilty, and subsequently sentenced to death.

On the evening before his execution, however, an old man appeared at the encampment at Valley Forge. His name was Peter Miller, and he was a popular Baptist preacher in that area, well-known for his support of the American cause.

He made his way to George Washington's headquarters and requested to see the general. “Certainly,” said Washington, “show him in.”

“I have a favor to ask of you,” said Miller.

“I shall be glad to grant you almost anything,” replied Washington, “for we are surely indebted to you for many favors. Tell me, what is it?”

“I hear that Michael Wittman has been found guilty of treason,” said Miller, “and that he is to be hanged tomorrow morning. I have come to ask for his pardon.”

Washington stared back. “That is impossible. He has done everything in his power to betray us. In these perilous times we dare not be lenient with traitors, and, for that reason, I am sorry but I cannot pardon your friend.”

“Why, he’s no friend of mine,” exclaimed the old preacher. “He’s the bitterest enemy I have. He has persecuted me for years; even beaten me and spat in my face, knowing full well that I would not strike back. No... Michael Wittman is no friend of mine!”

Washington, naturally, was puzzled. “And still you wish to pardon him?” he finally asked. “I do,” answered Miller, “I ask it of you as a personal favor.”

“Then tell me,” said Washington. “Why *is it* that you would ask for the pardon of your very worst enemy?”

Here was the old man’s brief response: “I ask it... because Jesus did as much for me.”

But that’s not the *end* of the story. Peter Miller then personally took George Washington’s handwritten pardon and, traveling through the night, arrived just before Wittman was to be hanged the next morning. “A pardon! A pardon from General Washington,” he cried out. Upon reading it, the officer in charge ordered that the prisoner be unbound and let go.

Peter Miller had saved the life of his bitter enemy, perhaps his only enemy in the world. And Michael Wittman, it is said, went forth as a free man, but also as a *changed* man. Grateful that his life had been spared, he never again was a threat to the American cause...

It was Mother Teresa who once said, "We are all pencils in the hand of a writing God, who is sending love letters to the world."

Again, we love, only because God first loved us. It's that simple. That basic... And that profound.

In the end, it's true, all we need is love – God's love – inspiring and guiding us. God's love, that, in our limited and imperfect way, we nevertheless strive to live out in our own lives...

All you *need* is love, sang the Beatles. For us Christians, that's because we believe that God's love has made all the difference in our lives...

But then we also have to ask ourselves this: "Have *I* loved, have I even *tried* to love as God has loved me? Have I loved with that *agape* kind of love; love that is sacrificial, intentional, and unconditional?"

You see, it's not an abstract idea, this *agape* love. Nor is it merely a powerful emotion. Instead, it's the kind of love that results when we make a decision to *be* loving; even when we don't feel like it; even when the other person doesn't deserve it.

Tertullian, one of the theologians of the early church, was not originally a Christian. But, as he later declared, the one thing that caused him to convert to Christianity was not the arguments they gave him which, as a former lawyer, he could always find a counterpoint to. No, it was something else entirely. "They demonstrated something I didn't have," he remarked. "The thing that converted me to Christianity was the way that they loved each other."



When I was confirmed here at Hope, 48 years ago next month, my confirmation class sang a popular worship song of that period. It was entitled: “They will know we are Christians by our love.”

They will know we are Christians by our love... They *should*, of course. That’s the whole idea. But the question always is simply this: *Will they?*

Amen.