

Fruit of the Spirit: Love in Three Dimensions -
1John 4:7-12

But the fruit of the Spirit is LOVE, joy, peace, patience, kindness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self control. Today's fruit is LOVE, the first Fruit listed in Galatians 5. Some believe that Love may be the only fruit, that all the other words listed can be considered dimensions of an expressed love. Think of a beautiful diamond cut to perfection. Each of its many facets shines brightly and when viewed in totality, what you see is one exquisite diamond. Can you think of an expressed love that doesn't contain some level of patience or self control, or kindness or goodness or faithfulness? And can you think of love from God that doesn't bring joy and peace? We thankfully talk about love every Sunday at First Presbyterian. As we begin our service: We say, "God is love; we are loved because we are made by Him and for Him. Made in His image." It is all true. Yet, I wonder if we grasp the immense and profound importance of those words. Does it really registers that not only are these truths beautiful but that we absolutely need them and long for them to be true? In fact, we can't live without knowing love. It is the air we breathe, and for the Christian it is the life blood of our lives, our faith, our ministry.

This morning we will take a broad look at love and loving and home in on three experienced dimensions that make love irreplaceable. I am not going to look at them as recorded by Jesus as the greatest commandment, (Love God, and love your neighbor as yourselves) but through the lens of John's letter to us in this morning's reading: God's love for us, our reciprocal love for God, and the outflow of that love to others. The three dimensions don't exist in a step by step order. In fact, for me they have been more like a spiral that takes me to deeper and deeper places of experiencing God's great love. I am going to start where I particularly, and maybe you also, have the most trouble - and folks that is not trying to love my neighbors, the Zickefooses. But then, I don't know your neighbor!!

I start here: knowing at a deep level that I am loved by God - and even liked by Him. This has been in an in and out sort of experience for me. But I believe it is one of the greatest needs we have and so difficult given our humanity - even as followers of Jesus who believe in who he is, what he has done for us. We can sing about love, we can hope for it, we can search the world for it but won't find the kind of love we long for anywhere but in God. Because He is totally committed to loving - He is love and He gives love. And different from every other love we may know and have, He is eternal and eternally the same. You see when I recognize my own humanity, I am desperate to have love which is free, unconditional, unbreakable, forever. Jesus assures me that

God so loved the world that He gave...

The Apostle John affirms it in his first letter, chapter 3:1

Look at the kind of love the Father has given us - He calls his children.

But let's get real...Most of us have come to a place at least once in life when we feel very unlovable...Sin is our problem, and it is what separates us from God's love. Sin isn't just what we do, it is our attempt to be God in our lives and everyone else's too. Sin is why Jesus died for us. We can't own the love of God for us, expressed to us in its depth in the death of Christ without recognizing that it was because of our great need. Yes we we are made in the image of God. But that image has been marred and our lives don't even come close to reflecting the love, perfection, holiness, compassion and inclusivity of our God. Look around the world - it's a mess made by broken, incomplete people, many of whom are trying their very best to do the right thing and even so end up hurting others, causing all kinds of grief and sorrow even to those they love. Does this resonate for you? It does for me.

We must embrace and be embraced by God's love - to own it, and know it. I love Mary, Jesus' mother in Luke when she is marveling at God's love for herself. One translation of Luke 2 quotes Mary as saying, "The One who can do all things, has done great things for me!!" It's the "for me" that touches me! His love is personal, yes it's for the world, but for His love to sink deep into my soul, I must believe and receive the truth beyond head knowledge that His love is mine. For many, even Christians, to know God's love in this dimension is incredibly difficult, because we know a lot about ourselves that no one else knows. You and I know that there are times when we are very unlovable!! If you are unaware of this for yourself, ask a spouse or a close and fearless friend! We fail, we falter, we totally blow it. And all that floundering and sinning and being sinned against leaves us feeling ashamed and guilty. Our internal language and talk turns to "I can't, I'm a loser, if anyone knew the real me..." Guilt and shame can rule our thinking so that accepting the pure, forever, no holds barred love of God is manageable only at a very surface level. Without love from God that wipes away that shame and guilt through forgiveness and by the Spirit's inner reassurance, we live as mere cardboard copies of the real selves that God loves and accepts.

I knew a young man, who is now sadly gone. His story will sound familiar to some of you. He was deeply wounded in his young life, turned to alcohol, drugs, and abusing others, especially women. He was presented with the Love of God and he was eventually loved by good people who stood by him, attempting to help him. He wanted badly to know that kind of love. Yet he seemingly was unable to let God love him. The pain of his past was so great that the only voices that were real to him were condemnation. He eventually drank and drugged himself to death. Some folks get stuck in a place of longing for God's love, yet never letting go of the shame and guilt of their past lives.

The story of Peter comes to my mind. He betrayed Jesus three times. Jesus asks Him three times, "Do you love me, Peter?" Peter answers "Yes, Lord. You know I love you." I think based on the rest of his life that this settled the past for Peter. So let's allow Jesus to ask that question of us. Most of us may try to answer it with a resounding "YES!". But at the deepest level of our conscious minds, some folks, maybe some of us, will turn the question around and all our lives will ask, "Jesus, do you, can you, really love me? Do you like me?" Never able to accept His resounding YES from the cross. But unresolved guilt and shame have an answer in the perfect all-encompassing forgiveness offered by God. By not boldly facing our inadequacies, unfinished tasks, and the sin that so easily ensnares us with the acceptance of God's love, we will keep trying to earn a love that is freely given, in fact lavished on us. To know His love for us is essential!

Once you welcome being the beloved of God and begin to understand and accept it at more than a head knowledge, then even on those bad days when you have failed badly, are down in the dumps about yourself, have lost what you loved and what loved you, you can accept yourself - a human being loved by the Creator. Reciprocal love grows by leaps and bounds and that is the second dimension of love described in 1John. John tells us in the passage we read this morning that we love God because He first loved us. "This is love: not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins." that second dimension is also a work of the Holy Spirit in our lives. That's all I can say here.

So the first two dimensions of love from John's letter are God loves me, and because of the depth of that love, I love Him. The third dimension that we will explore a bit this morning is that God's love is hungry! By that I mean that God's love is always looking for more folks on whom Love can be lavished. God so loved the WORLD - not just a few lucky ones, not just the good guys with the white hats, not just the ones who say all the right words, believe the right things, give to the right places, do the list of acceptable actions. He loves the WORLD. That takes in everyone. There are groups of

people today who have great trouble with the word, "inclusive." I'm thinking they haven't read John 3:16! He is an inclusive God, with a hungry love.

So, Jesus, sent from the Father, gave a new/old commandment. He says its all about love. My command is this: "Love each other as I have loved you." Love each other, don't love like the world where everyone loves their own and those who treat them nice. His love is available to his enemies - and he calls us to that kind of loving and then demonstrated it to the max in His death on the cross. Paul says, "Sometimes a righteous man will give his life for his friends, but it was while we were still sinners that Christ died for us" - even knowing that some would ultimately reject his love. We struggle over the issues that divide us - who's in, who's out. I am confused, undecided, conflicted over many issues today. Jesus says when in doubt, LOVE. Paul echoes that command in Ephesians 5:1-2 " As dearly loved children, live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us"

As we attempt to get our arms around what it means to grow in the fruit of the Holy Spirit this summer, we ask how do I cooperate with the Holy Spirit's work in me to develop this sweet fruit of LOVE? Once again we return to Jesus' own words in John 15: Remain in me - abide in me, and I will remain in you - and you will produce much fruit.

I am going to suggest only one way of abiding, remaining in Jesus this morning: get to know Jesus...really know him. Steve Green sang a beautiful song a generation ago. Some of the words go like this: "O I want to know you more, deep within my heart I want to know You. Oh I want to know you . To feel your heart and know your mind Looking in your eyes stirs up within me, Cries that say I want to know you, I want to know you more." The primary way we get to know Him is by walking through the gospels with him. Choose a gospel and read it through in one sitting if you can. And then read it again and again this summer. If you get bored, read it in a different translation which may give new insights or nuanced understanding to the message. Watch how he loved, was it always squishy, soft and tender? Was it sometimes tough love - in other words, it was for the best of the other person. Was it sacrificial? What did it cost Him?

Long ago I read a small book by Elizabeth Elliot titled "Love Has a Price Tag" and it reminds me that although love is free to me, it is costly to love like Jesus did and does...yet that this is the standard He sets and asks of His followers. I was talking with a friend recently we came to the conclusion that love is a burden for those who give it and for those who receive it. For the giver of God-like Love there is a sacrifice of time and resources, maybe even pain and suffering as we encounter the suffering of others. The burden for the receiver of such love is the same as receiving a precious gift - you need to treasure it, handle it with care, invest it wisely, and wear it well.

How do I do this as both a receiver and a giver of God's love? Once again I walk with Jesus. I listen to him, watch how he reacts, ask myself what moves him to compassion, to confrontation? How does he handle controversy, the criticism? How does he handle betrayal, rejection, suffering and death. Walk with Jesus, abide with Him,

What else can we say - Let God love us deeply, Love Him back with all we have, and let that love flow out from our lives as the beautiful fruit that it is, blessing everyone we meet along the way.

Our closing words of prayer are the words of the Apostle Paul to the Philippians from The Message, "So this is our prayer: that our love will flourish and that we will not only love much but well. That we will learn to love appropriately. We need to use our heads and test our feelings so that our love is sincere and intelligent, not sentimental gush. That we will live lover's lives, circumspect and

exemplary, lives Jesus will be proud of: bountiful in fruits from the soul, making Jesus Christ attractive to all, getting everyone involved in the glory and praise of God.” Amen.