

John tells us in our Epistle reading for today that God is love. And because God is love, we also love one another. Because the way that we love God influences the way that we love each other. But there's an important word that we need to focus on today, and that word is love. What do we mean by love? What do we mean when we say that we love God? What do we mean when we say that we love each other? What do we mean when we say that God is love? That's the question that we need to answer. What is love?

Because love is a word which everybody uses. Christians, the world, it doesn't matter. Everybody has an idea of what love is. Just turn on the radio, for example. I guarantee you that most of the songs that you're going to hear on the radio are going to talk about love one way or another. Or turn on the TV. It's really hard to find a movie or show that doesn't have something to do with love, even if it's just one small subplot. Or even just listen to the way that people talk. Love is something which comes up all the time. So everybody in the world has an idea of what love is. But what we want to ask ourselves is: does our idea of love come from the world? Do we think about love based on what we hear from the radio or what we see on TV? And if that's the case, Christians, how does that change the way that we look at God? And how does that change the way that we look at one another?

Let me use an example here. Do you think that love is a feeling? An emotion, something which makes you feel real good? That warm feeling which we have for another person. That thrill which we get whenever we are with them. Or even that smile that grows on our face whenever we think about them. Is that love? Because the world certainly says that it is. And it's actually really hard to come up with specific examples for this, because it's just so prevalent in the world. It's hard to find a song that talks about love that doesn't present it as a feeling, about the way that we feel about someone else. Even when it's talking about love which is lost, it talks about being sad. Another emotion, another feeling. So the world certainly thinks this way, that love is a feeling. But is that what love is?

Because if love is a feeling, Christians, then how does that change the way that we look at God? It will cause us to look at God in very emotional kind of terms. Because loving God is something which makes us feel good, right? We like the way that God makes us feel. It's something positive. It's something uplifting. Something that makes me feel good about myself. But in that case, when we think of God in terms of our emotions, we're going to start thinking about him only in terms of good emotions. Because nobody likes to feel bad, right? Nobody likes feeling sad or miserable or anything like that. We want to avoid those things. So if loving God is about the way that we feel, we are thinking about the good things. And we tend to not listen when God says something that makes us feel bad. Because if God talks about sin, that feels bad. I don't want to think about that. I'm not going to listen to what God has to say when he says that I am a sinner. Or when God talks about suffering, that feels bad. I don't want to talk about that. I don't want to listen to what God has to do with my suffering. Or when God talks about hell, that feels bad. And so maybe I don't want to think that anybody is actually going to go there. Because when love for God becomes about the way that I feel, Christians, we end up only listening when we feel good.

But how does that influence the way that we love one another, then? Pretty much the same way. Because I will only love my neighbor when it makes me feel good. We're getting along great. I

like that. That makes me feel good. I can love him really easily. Or we're working well together. That makes me feel good. I can get along with him. I can love him in that case. But what about when it hurts to love your brother? What about when it costs you something to love them? When it costs you your time or your money or your pride or whatever it may be? Is it so easy to love them then? No, because that hurts. That doesn't feel good. And if love is just a feeling, then I'm only going to love my brother when it makes me feel good. So you can see, then, how the world thinking of love in this way has twisted how we look at God and one another.

To use another example: do you think that love is about acceptance? I accept you for who you are, no matter what happens. I accept you even when you do something that I don't like. That's also a very common idea of love that comes from the world, this idea of accepting somebody just as they are. In fact, you will very often hear people say things like "love wins." By which they mean, of course, whenever we just accept everyone just as they are, then we'll get rid of all of our problems. Love wins so we won't have any more war. We won't have any more bigotry. We won't have any more hatred. Everything will be perfect, once we just accept each other. Or you even hear people say, "just do what you love," which is always followed by "who am I to judge?" I can't say anything against it, because I just accept you for who you are. That's also what the world means by love, this idea of accepting them just as they are.

But if love is acceptance, Christians, how does that change how we look at God? Then God becomes one who accepts us, right? God loves me and accepts me just the way that I am. And too often we hear people say: "God doesn't make mistakes. He accepts me just the way that he made me." And this idea of acceptance can even go against what the Bible says. God accepts me, so I don't have to listen to what the Bible says. I can live totally opposite to whatever the Bible says. Because love in this way makes me ignore the Word. It changes God into someone who just accepts me, someone who just loves me, so that there's no need for me to change. There's no need for me to repent. There's no need for me to stop sinning, because God accepts me just as I am. And I don't even have to care what the Bible says.

What does that do, then, to our love for one another? It's the same thing. Because then I just accept you for who you are. And I can't say anything against you. I can't tell you you're doing the wrong thing. I can't tell you that you're sinning, because that would make me unloving, according to the world. And so I never get around to telling you that you are sinning. I never get around to telling you that you need to change your life. If God accepts you, then I just do it too. And I will affirm who you are, even as you run straight into hell.

Because this is the problem, Christians, of thinking about love the way that the world does. We end up distorting God into something else, changing him to fit our ideas, to fit with the world's ideas of love. And when we do that, we're really making love into our god. Instead of saying "God is love," we end up saying, "love is god." And when love is our god, then we will judge the real God by it. And people will say things like, how could a loving God send anyone to hell? That doesn't seem like love. How could a loving God let bad things happen? That doesn't seem like love. How could a loving God say that I am a sinner? That doesn't seem like love. Because when love is our god, Christians, that means that I don't need to change anything. It means that I don't need to repent. I don't even need faith. I can get into heaven just by feeling good. Is it any wonder that the world likes this idea of love?

But God is love, Christians, just not in the way that the world thinks. God is love. It's not something separate from him. It's not like love is a feeling that God feels from time to time. Love is not even something that God just does. God is love, the very heart of what it means to be love. And even if there was no one in all of creation for him to love, he would still be love, because he is love itself. Because God is the most holy Trinity, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. The Father loves the Son. The Son loves the Father. And the Father and the Son love the Spirit, and the Spirit loves them both. God is love by his very nature. And even if we weren't here, he would still be love.

But God has also loved us, Christians, by showing us his Son. Because God didn't just have a warm feeling towards us in Jesus. That wouldn't do anything for us. God didn't just accept us as we are in Jesus. That wouldn't solve our problem of sin. God showed his love for us in that while we were still sinners, while we were still his enemies, Jesus died for us. God gave him up for us all. Jesus has laid down his life so that we would be forgiven. That is love. And because of that love which God first showed to us in Jesus, we also love him.

And Christians, this love which we have for God also shows itself in the way that we love one another. We care for one another. We provide for one another. Because it's not just a feeling towards my brother. How would that help him? It's not just accepting him as he is. How would that help my brother? But rather it is loving him the way that God first loved us, even when it hurts, so that we can provide for him, care for him, be patient with him, and warn him when he's going the wrong way. That is all love. It is a love we have through Jesus Christ.

So Christians, let us love one another. Let us forgive one another. Let us be patient with one another. Let us build each other up. Because God first loved us in Jesus Christ. God is love, and because he is love, we love him, and we also love one another.

Let us pray. Lord God, heavenly Father, you have showed us your love through your Son, Jesus Christ. Help us always to also love one another, so that we may follow after you in all things. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.