

# **The Cross on Top**

## Sermon 4/6 in a Series on 1 John

Once upon a time, there was a woman who went to a pet store to purchase a parrot. She took her new pet home but returned the next day complaining that the parrot had not said a word.

“Does it have a mirror?” asked the storekeeper. “Parrots are more talkative when they can see themselves.” So, she bought a mirror.

The next day she was back, announcing that the bird still wasn't speaking. “What about a ladder?” the storekeeper asked. “Parrots like to walk up and down ladders.” She bought the bird a ladder and went home. Next day, she was back. Still no talk.

The storekeeper suggested a little swing for the cage. She bought one of those, but still no talk.

The next day she returned to the store to announce that the bird had died. The storekeeper said, “I'm terribly sorry to hear that. Did the bird ever say anything before it died?”

“Yes,” said the lady. “It said, ‘Don't they sell any food down there at the pet store?’”

Just at the pet store owner neglected to give the lady the thing most essential for the parrot's survival so too in the church we can become side tracked with things that are secondary and so forget that which is most important. Unless we lead people to the Cross we deny them the only soul-food that can keep them from starving to death spiritually. We must keep the Cross on top.

St. John was very aware of this problem in the church addressed by his letter because they were forgetting who and what was most important. There were those within the community who were distracting people with ideas leading them away from Jesus and his Cross. But says John this is something we can never do because it is only when the church has the cross on top that we can be a people who affirm that God is love. And this message is to the church what parrot food was to that elegant bird. Without living out this teaching we have no life as a church and we are as good as dead.

This letter is saturated with the theology of the love of God. God's love is his active goodwill toward us. Throughout the letter John says it is at the Cross that this goodwill is made known to us. Nowhere in the letter does this theme receive more attention than in these fourteen verses. In this portion of the letter John uses the word love more than 20 times. In so doing John not only helps us realize what it means to say that God is love. He then guides us to better understand how this influences the way we live with others.

Clement of Alexandria said in a startling phrase that the real Christian practices being God. Clement was steeped in the theology of John. If we are to practice being God we must also love because God is love.

This is made clear in verses 9-11 and 13-16. Here John says: 9 God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. 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.

By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit. 14 And we have seen and do testify that the Father has sent his Son as the Savior of the world. 15 God abides in those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God, and they abide in God. 16 So we have known and believe the love that God has for us.

Here John teaches us something that is very important. To know God's love is not based on our feelings for our feelings are so very fleeting. Rather it is rooted God showing himself to us, or as John says "God's revelation" and our confession that Jesus is the Son of God. When we know at the core of our being that this is who Jesus is, the Holy Spirit deepens this conviction. Look at verse 15. Notice John says that God abides in those who actively confess that Jesus is the Son of God. As we know Jesus John says we will know the love of God.

But if we are to abide in his love it is important for us to see the Cross as the place where this love is revealed to us. At verse 10 John underscores an amazing aspect to God's character. He sent his son because he loves us at a time when we had no love for him. "In this is love not that we loved God but he loved us." This teaching is one that brings us to our knees in praise and thanksgiving. Even when we have no regard for God he loves us so much that he sends Jesus to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. The word used here for atoning sacrifice is the same word that is used in chapter

2:2 “and he is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.” This is the word that we hear as propitiation in the Comfortable Words just prior to the Prayer of Consecration in the BCP Communion Service. Remember there we hear: “We have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the Righteous and he is the propitiation for our sins.” Now in order to understand the love of God we need to grasp the meaning of this word “propitiation” or as it says in the text “atoning sacrifice.”

Because of sin, God's righteous anger is moved by our collective disobedience. He has to do something with this anger because God has created a moral universe in which justice cannot be ignored. But in Christ at the Cross, Jesus paid the penalty demanded by God's broken law, that was due from us. In paying it to the full he both upheld the righteousness of God and met the deepest need in human beings. God's justice and his mercy are equally satisfied. That is why John says that Christ's atoning sacrifice is a propitiation. To propitiate someone is to appease them. At the Cross God appeases His wrath and declares that God doesn't deal with us as our sin deserves. Why? Because God's essence is love.

Remember Clement of Alexander's point that the real Christian practices being God. When we come to know his love for us then we will truly love as he loved. John says as much in the other verses in this passage.

Look at verse 11:

Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. 12 No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.

Remember John said previously that as we confess that Jesus is the Son of God we abide in the love of God. Now John says that as we practice active goodwill towards one another God's love is perfected in us. If we are going to grow in the love of God there needs to be ways in which this love is expressed in practical ways.

John understands that although he saw God in the flesh none of those to whom he is writing ever did. Nor have we. But as we truly learn to love one another, not only is God's love made visible but this love is also an expression of our love for God

Such a love will allow us to pour out all the contents of our hearts to one another,

chaff and grain together, knowing that the gentlest of hands will take it and sift it, keep what is worth keeping, and with the breath of kindness blow the rest away."

In the passage read from Acts this morning we have an example of what it means to love one another. As the Ethiopian Eunuch reads from the Prophet Isaiah Philip approaches him and asks "Do you understand what you are reading?" 31 He replied, "How can I, unless someone guides me?" And he invited Philip to get in and sit beside him.

There is something here for us to reflect on. Notice that the Eunuch didn't say "How can I, unless someone teaches me." No what he said was "How can I unless someone guides me." He then invites Philip to sit beside him. The Ethiopian did not ask for a teacher, he asked for a guide. There is a big difference. Teachers point and say, "Go there, do that." Guides reach out and say, "This is the road I traveled. You might want to try it." Philip got in the chariot with the Ethiopian. Luke went out of his way to say that both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water for the baptism. Teachers say, "I told you so." Guides come after you if you lose your way. This is love in action.

St. John writes to his cantankerous community as a guide. He reminds, cajoles, warns, exhorts and invites, and consistently uses the first person plural when addressing his readers: "Let us love one another," not "You should love each other." "We deceive ourselves," not "You're fooling yourselves." More than that, the tone of the letter is of one whose heart aches for the apparent lack of love and for the struggles roiling his community, and who writes tenderly to his beloved ones, his little children.

John showed by his words and actions what it means to be a guide and a friend and in so doing shows what it means to love.

To love means that we will come along side others in ways that will challenge us and stretch us because we will give of ourselves. But as we choose to love as Jesus loves we will be perfected in love. And in so doing not only will we practice being God but show that we are feeding on the soul-food of the Cross as we both know the love of God and extend it to others.