

Sermon by Dr. Michael J. Hoyt
Glenshaw Presbyterian Church
Sixth Sunday of Easter
May 25, 2003

Transforming Love Series #3
Abiding in God's Love
1 John 4:7-21

Reading the Letter of 1st John can at times produce a dizzying effect in the mind.
The elder writes in a style that seems to lead us in circles,
dancing around and around a few related themes,
coming back to each theme again and again in complex choreography
each time from a different angle, in a different light.

This rhetorical dance is a technique called “amplification” –
a sort of “circular redundancy”,
that suggested to ancient listeners that the subject of the letter
is lofty and divine, and worthy of a certain level of grandeur.

So round and round we go with the elder of 1st John,
dancing to the music of divine love:

*God is love,
and those who abide in love abide in God
and God abides in them*

*If we love one another,
God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.*

*Love has been perfected among us in this:
that we may have boldness on the day of judgment,
because as he is, so are we in this world.*

*There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear;
for fear has to do with punishment,
and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love*

*Those who abide in love abide in God
and God abides in them.*

Perhaps the place to begin as we explore what it means to abide in God's love,
is with those places in our lives where we are clearly not abiding in God's love.
And if we take our clue from this text,
then the place for us to look is at our fears.
Not just our moments of fear
For those moments of fear are normal, they are human, they are unavoidable:

a near miss with a tractor trailer on the turnpike,
and your life flashes before your eyes.
a news story about a terrorist attack,
and your chest and neck get tight.
the doctor gives you the test results: you are going to need surgery,
and your stomach gets queasy, your knees get weak.

This kind of fear, these normal physical reactions to stress,
do not indicate the imperfection of love.

It is more that undercurrent of fear – when fear becomes chronic –
that it becomes a sign that we are not abiding in God's love.

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Several months ago, Jim Wallis, editor of Sojourners magazine
was speaking at a conference in Florida.
After returning to his hotel room one night
there was a voicemail message waiting for him from his 4-year old son, Luke.
He and Luke had already talked on the phone several times that day
as was their usual custom when Jim was traveling.
But, several hours had passed since they had spoken,
and there were lots of things to tell him about!
Luke's little voice always brought a smile to Jim's face,
as he enthusiastically gave him a blow-by-blow account of his day's activities.
Luke's phone signoff had become especially wonderful
and always warmed the heart of both his mom and dad:
"Daddy, I love you, I like you, and you're incredible!"
It's just the kind of unconditional affirmation we all need but find hard to accept.
(Jim reflects that it's close to what God wants to tell us sometimes.)
But it's probably easier to receive it from a child.
But then Jim's son finished his message with something he had never said before.
Completely out of the blue, 4-year-old Luke said,
"Daddy, don't be afraid."
Jim could hear his wife catch her breath in the background.
Where did a little child find those words?
They hadn't been talking about anything that could have prompted it.

"Be not afraid."
These were the most frequent words of Jesus to his disciples in the New Testament.
He kept repeating this instruction over and over,
as if he knew how much his followers needed to hear it.¹

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¹ Jim Wallis, *Hearts and Minds*, SojoMail 05.21.03.

The text of 1st John talks about the kind of fear that has to do with punishment,
punishment which comes as a result of judgment.
Love cannot be perfected in us when we are afraid of judgment;
when we are afraid that our lives will be measured and found lacking.

When we are afraid of the judgment of our peers...
that they will judge us insignificant, incompetent, inferior
or that they will judge us uninteresting, unattractive, unlovable
not worthy of friendship or intimacy.

Love cannot be perfected in us
when we are afraid of the judgment of our parents...
We don't have to live with them, or even near them;
they don't even have to be alive anymore for us to fear their judgment
that they will judge us as not measuring up to the standard
not measuring up to their expectations
for some, that fear of parental judgment comes with the fear of pain
from the back of a hand,
or from punishing words, or even just a punishing look
or with the agony of their parents' silent abandonment.

But perhaps more than our peers or our parents
we are afraid of the judgment we heap on ourselves;
afraid that when we look deep down and see the things that only we can see
we will discover just how deeply flawed we are,
just how disappointed in ourselves we have become,
just how many times and ways we have failed to be
who we thought we could have been.

Now either I'm completely off the mark,
or you are somewhat familiar with some these kinds of judgments.

And we make every effort to protect ourselves from judgment
by making sure we're a step ahead of our peers,
judging them before they get the chance to judge us;
or by distancing ourselves emotionally from our parents,
or other members of our family,
or just cutting ourselves off from them;
or by not looking too deeply into our own lives for fear of what we might find,
not looking too closely in the mirror
and finally cutting ourselves off from that knowledge of ourselves
which is so essential for healthy living
and the absence of which is the deepest alienation.

But ultimately our fear is not just that of our peers, or our parents, or ourselves,
but of the judgment of God upon our lives,
that God may one day look at our lives and give the final decree
that all our other judges are right in their criticisms.

Fear has to do with judgment and punishment,
but the good news is this:

*God the Father – note the parental image (not a gender image) –
God the Father has sent his Son as the Savior of the world
And God abides in those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God
And abiding in this God of love
we may have boldness on the day of judgment,
because as he is, so we are in this world.*

What does this mean?

That God is a God of doctrinal correctness??

That at the final judgment we will be given final, heavenly theology exam,
and required to make a statement about Jesus Christ
that is technically correct?

No – hard as it is for a guy whose just gotten his doctorate to admit it –
doctrinal correctness is not the source of our boldness on the day of judgment.

To withstand the judgment

is to know that God is who Jesus revealed God to be,
that God is not a God who yearns to punish,
but a God who yearns to feed, and to heal and to bless,
that God's last word about us is not a word of judgment,
but a word of love;
indeed, that God's very name is love.

God, the Father of Jesus Christ,

is a God who is revealed in the words of the 4-year old little boy
who says to his beloved,
“I love you, I like you, and you're incredible!
...Don't be afraid.”

* * * * *

Last week on Tuesday night, the Confirmation Class of this church
shared their statements of faith with the Session.

First they introduced themselves by telling about shoeboxes they had decorated.

The outside of these shoeboxes

were covered with a collage of pictures from magazines, newspapers,
and printouts from the internet:
pictures of sports figures, movies, musical instruments, shoes,
patriotic symbols, and so on.

These pictures represented what others see and know about them.

On the inside, words and pictures that describe who they know themselves to be:
words about faith, and character and family.

It was enjoyable to watch each of these young men and women share in this fashion

because looking at pictures on a shoebox
is not like reading from the printed page.
The shoe box must be turned around and around in your hands,
pointing to your favorite, most significant pictures first,
and then moving on to the others, so that the box is constantly turning,
and viewed from every angle, outside and inside.
It was a nice exercise for our young people,
for them to glimpse, and to give others a glimpse, of the beauty of their own lives.
I believe this is the way God looks at our lives and adores us:
Turning our lives over and around, admiring every beautiful aspect,
seeing us from every angle, adoring us outside and inside,
because we are God's children.

Abiding in God's love, basking in God's adoration of our lives,
means that we can enter into relationships with others
with all the assurance we need
that we are already accepted and approved.
We are now free to love our brothers and sisters, our neighbors, even our enemies,
because we are assured that we are perfectly, eternally loved by God.

Knowing that we are loved in this way by God
does not answer all the tough questions about our relationships,
or about how best to love others.
But this steadfast love of God for us gives us solid ground on which to stand
as we seek to love others,
as we seek to work out our relationships
according to the love we have been shown.

And as we work out these other relationships, doing the hard work of loving,
loving with our action, not just with our words,
God's love perfected in us.

That is, we become the agents, the vessels of God's love
in the lives of our brothers and sisters, our neighbors, our enemies.

So no matter what you may fear, you can stand firm on this good news...
God is love. God loves you.
And you are the vessel of God's love for others.
No matter who in your life may be judging you...
God is love. God loves you.
And you are the vessel of God's love for others.
No matter who you have failed, or who has failed you...
God is love. God loves you.
And you are the vessel of God's love for others.
No matter what illness you face, or how repulsive your own body has become to you...
God is love. God loves you.

And you are the vessel of God's love for others.
No matter what terror or what evil may pretend to be sovereign in the world
God is love. God loves you.
And you are the vessel of God's love for others.
No matter how long your road, how dark your tunnel, how deep your valley...
God is love. God loves you.
And you are the vessel of God's love for others.

Abide in God's love.
Abide in God's love, and God will abide in you
and will make your joy complete.

Amen.