

I John 4:7-21
April 29, '18

“LOVERS & LIARS”

**THE MOST CHALLENGING SENTENCE TO
COMPOSE IN A SERMON IS THE FIRST ONE.**

THAT WAS TRUE OF THIS SERMON AS WELL.

**THAT FIRST SENTENCE – “*THE MOST
CHALLENGING SENTENCE TO COMPOSE IN A SERMON IS
THE FIRST ONE*” TOOK ME MORE THAN AN HOUR TO
WRITE.**

**IN ACTUALITY, IT PROBABLY TOOK ME 10 HOURS
JUST TO GET TO THE PLACE WHERE I COULD SPEND
AN HOUR COMPOSING THAT FIRST SENTENCE!**

**YOU MAY FIND THAT SURPRISING, BUT IT
SHOULDN'T BE.**

**WE ALL KNOW THE TRUTH OF THE ANCIENT
CHINESE PROVERB – “*A JOURNEY OF A THOUSAND
MILES BEGINS WITH A SINGLE STEP.*”**

**YOU’VE PROBABLY FOUND THAT TO BE TRUE IN
YOUR OWN WRITING – WHETHER IT BE A PAPER FOR
A CLASS OR EVEN A LETTER TO A FRIEND.**

AND IT’S NOT JUST IN WRITING, IS IT?

**IT MIGHT BE A HOME REPAIR PROJECT OR
PLANNING A TRIP OR BUYING A CAR OR A THOUSAND
OTHER CHALLENGES IN LIFE.**

GETTING STARTED IS HARD.

**YOU MAY REMEMBER THE WORDS, “*LET’S START
AT THE VERY BEGINNING – A VERY GOOD PLACE TO
START*” AS THE OPENING WORDS OF THE SONG “DO-
RE-MI” FROM “THE SOUND OF MUSIC.”**

**NOW, I’M TELLING YOU ALL OF THAT TO TELL
YOU THIS.**

**IN THE MIDST OF MY TRAUMA THIS PAST WEEK IN
STARTING THIS SERMON – IN THAT ONE-HOUR TIME
FRAME I SUGGESTED IT TOOK ME TO COMPLETE**

**THAT FIRST SENTENCE – MR. OWEN SHOWED UP
OUTSIDE MY OFFICE.**

**YOU MAY NOT KNOW WHO “MR. OWEN” IS – OR,
RATHER, YOU DON’T KNOW HIM BY THAT NAME.**

**YOU KNOW HIM AS SIMPLY “OWEN” OR “*THAT
YOUNGEST TIPTON BOY.*”**

**BUT, TO ME, HE’S “MR. OWEN” BECAUSE HE
COMES TO THE CHURCH OFFICE WITH ERIN SEVERAL
TIMES A WEEK, LOADED DOWN WITH ALL SORTS OF
“WORK” FOR THE DAY.**

**WELL, ON THE DAY THIS PAST WEEK, WHEN I WAS
STRUGGLING TO COME UP WITH THAT OPENING
SENTENCE FOR A SERMON BASED ON ONE OF THE
MOST WELL-KNOWN PASSAGES ABOUT GOD’S LOVE
IN THE ENTIRE BIBLE, MR. OWEN STOOD AT MY DOOR
WITH ONE OF OUR SCRIPTURE ROCKS THAT HE HAD
JUST FOUND.**

**HE SHOWED IT TO ME AND, LO & BEHOLD, THE
SCRIPTURE VERSE ON THAT ROCK THAT MR. OWEN
HAD FOUND WAS NONE OTHER THAN “*GOD IS LOVE.*”**

**SO, ALONG WITH ALL THE OTHER WORK THAT
“MR. OWEN” ACCOMPLISHED HERE AT CHURCH THAT
DAY, HE PROVIDED ME WITH THE OPENING TO THIS
SERMON.**

**YOU JUST HEARD THOSE WORDS ON MR. OWEN’S
ROCK AS A KEY PORTION OF OUR SCRIPTURE
READING THIS MORNING.**

**THOSE ARE PROBABLY AMONG THE FIRST WORDS
THAT YOU EVER LEARNED FROM THE BIBLE.**

**THEY’RE THE FIRST WORDS OUR CHILDREN
LEARN IN OUR BIBLE MEMORY CONTEST.**

**IT MAY ALSO BE SUGGESTED THAT THEY ARE THE
MOST IMPORTANT WORDS THAT OUR CHILDREN
WILL EVER LEARN FROM THE BIBLE.**

THEY'RE THE MOST IMPORTANT WORDS THAT ANY OF US WILL EVER LEARN FROM SCRIPTURE.

I DON'T THINK THERE'S A BOOK IN THE BIBLE THAT LENDS ITSELF AS EASILY TO A ONE-WORD SYNOPSIS AS DOES FIRST JOHN & THAT ONE WORD IS "LOVE."

IN THIS PASSAGE ITSELF, THE WORD OCCURS 27 TIMES!

OVER & OVER AGAIN, THROUGHOUT THESE VERSES, JOHN TELLS US OF THE IMPORTANCE OF LOVE.

AND IT'S HERE IN THIS PASSAGE THAT WE FIND WHAT IS ARGUABLY THE GREATEST STATEMENT ABOUT GOD IN THE ENTIRE BIBLE - THE STATEMENT THAT "GOD IS LOVE."

IT IS THE FIRST THING WE MUST LEARN ABOUT GOD.

**BUT EVEN THOUGH IT'S THE FIRST THING WE
LEARN ABOUT GOD – EVEN THOUGH IT'S SO SIMPLE
THAT OUR TWO & THREE-YEAR-OLDS CAN MEMORIZE
IT - THERE IS NO THEOLOGIAN IN THE WORLD WHO
CAN FULLY GRASP ITS SIGNIFICANCE.**

IT IS BEYOND OUR COMPREHENSION.

**BUT WHAT JOHN TELLS US IN THIS PASSAGE IS
THAT IF WE ARE EVER GOING TO BEGIN TO
UNDERSTAND WHO GOD IS, IT WILL BE THROUGH
LOVE.**

“NO ONE HAS EVER SEEN GOD” HE TELLS US.

***BUT THEN HE GOES ON TO SAY, “...IF WE LOVE
ONE ANOTHER, GOD LIVES IN US, AND GOD'S LOVE IS
PERFECTED IN US.”***

**IN OTHER WORDS, IF WE WISH TO SEE GOD, WE
MUST LOVE.**

THAT'S HOW *WE* SEE GOD & THAT'S HOW *OTHERS* SEE GOD IN US.

CLEMENT OF ALEXANDRIA MADE THE STARTLING STATEMENT THAT “*THE REAL CHRISTIAN PRACTICES BEING GOD.*”

THAT RAISES ALL SORTS OF RED FLAGS FOR YOU, DOESN'T IT?

IT SEEMS TO BORDER ON BLASPHEMY.

BUT THAT'S PRECISELY WHAT JOHN IS TELLING US IN THIS PASSAGE.

HE IS TELLING US THAT THE ONLY WAY TO TRULY SEE GOD IS WHEN WE EXPRESS LOVE FOR OTHERS & WHEN WE SEE OTHERS DO THE SAME.

THERE ARE LITERALLY THOUSANDS OF SONG LYRICS THAT WE COULD REFER TO AS WE CONSIDER THIS PASSAGE THIS MORNING.

IN FACT, LAST SUMMER IN OUR SERIES ON “SONGS THAT SPEAK TO THE SOUL,” WE USED THIS VERY PASSAGE WHEN WE LOOKED AT THE STEVIE WONDER SONG, “LOVE’S IN NEED OF LOVE TODAY.”

WHEN I THINK OF A SONG THAT CONVEYS THE MESSAGE OF THIS PASSAGE – ONE THAT HELPS US UNDERSTAND WHAT JOHN IS COMMUNICATING WHEN HE SAYS THAT THE ONLY WAY TO TRULY SEE GOD IS FOR US TO EXPRESS LOVE TO OTHERS & TO OBSERVE OTHERS DOING THE SAME – THERE IS ONE PARTICULAR LYRIC THAT COMES TO MIND.

IT’S A SINGLE LINE – IN FACT, THE FINAL LINE - FROM “LES MISERABLES” WHEN WE HEAR JEAN VALJEAN FROM HIS DEATHBED SING, “TO LOVE ANOTHER PERSON IS TO SEE THE FACE OF GOD.”

IT’S JUST A SLIGHT VARIATION FROM A LINE IN VICTOR HUGO’S ACTUAL NOVEL & WHAT HUGO IS

DOING IS OFFERING *HIS OWN* SLIGHT VARIATION TO WHAT JOHN IS SAYING IN THIS PASSAGE – “*NO ONE HAS EVER SEEN GOD; IF WE LOVE ONE ANOTHER, GOD LIVES IN US AND HIS LOVE IS PERFECTED IN US.*”

JOHN FURTHER DEVELOPS THIS SAME THOUGHT THROUGHOUT THIS ENTIRE PASSAGE & IT SEEMS AS THOUGH HIS PASSION CONTINUES TO BUILD WITH EACH WORD HE WRITES.

HE WANTS, SO DESPERATELY, FOR HIS READERS TO UNDERSTAND THE IMPORTANCE OF WHAT’S HE’S SAYING.

HE WANTS US TO LOVE AS GOD LOVES.

HE WANTS US TO LOVE AS CHRIST LOVES.

WHEN WE THINK ABOUT THE LOVE OF CHRIST, IT SHATTERS ALL THE BOUNDARIES OF WHAT THE WORLD HAD EVER KNOWN.

JESUS SIMPLY IGNORED ALL THE LIMITS ON LOVE THAT THE RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES OF HIS DAY SOUGHT TO IMPOSE.

HE DINED WITH PEOPLE THE RELIGIOUS LEADERS LABELLED AS HERETICS.

HE TOUCHED THOSE WHO WERE UNTOUCHABLE.

HE WELCOMED THOSE WHO'D BEEN REJECTED.

HE EMBRACED THE FOREIGNER & BEFRIENDED THE FRIENDLESS.

HIS HARSHEST WORDS WERE RESERVED – NOT FOR THE IMPURE - BUT RATHER FOR THE HEARTLESS, UNLOVING & SELF-RIGHTEOUS RELIGIOUS LEADERS WHO SOUGHT TO EXCLUDE THE MOST NEEDY OF GOD'S CHILDREN.

AS WE READ THESE WORDS OF JOHN, IT ALMOST SEEMS AS THOUGH HE'S OVERCOME WITH ANGER & FRUSTRATION AT WHAT HE SEES IN THE LIVES OF

THOSE IN THE RELIGIOUS COMMUNITY WHOSE BEHAVIOR IS THE EXACT OPPOSITE OF WHAT IT MEANS TO BE A FOLLOWER OF JESUS CHRIST.

LAST SUNDAY, AS WE OBSERVED EARTH DAY, WE RAISED THE QUESTION AS TO HOW AN INDIVIDUAL CAN EXPECT TO BE WELCOMED INTO GOD'S *HEAVENLY* REALM IF THEY AREN'T EVEN WILLING TO SHOW RESPECT FOR GOD'S *EARTHLY* REALM.

A SIMILAR QUESTION CAN BE ASKED AS WE LOOK AT THESE WORDS OF JOHN – HOW CAN AN INDIVIDUAL SAY THEY LOVE GOD WHEN THEY DISPLAY NO LOVE WHATSOEVER FOR SOME OF GOD'S BELOVED?

THIS IS THE FRUSTRATION THAT JOHN SEEMS TO BE FEELING WITH THESE WORDS.

HE MAY HAVE LOOKED AT THE WORLD AROUND HIM & SEEN SO MANY PEOPLE WITH A DEEP

**SPIRITUAL VOID IN THEIR LIVES – PEOPLE WHO
DESPERATELY NEEDED TO KNOW THE LOVE OF GOD
THAT IS FOUND IN JESUS CHRIST.**

JOHN KNEW THAT LOVE.

**HE PERSONALLY KNEW HOW MUCH JESUS LOVED
EVERYONE HE EVER ENCOUNTERED.**

**HE HAD SEEN & EXPERIENCED THE LOVE OF
CHRIST THAT SHATTERED ALL THE RULES – LOVE
THAT BROKE DOWN ALL THE BARRIERS – LOVE THAT
WELCOMED EVERYONE TO BE A PART OF GOD’S
FAMILY.**

**BUT THEN, AS HE SAW THE WAY THOSE
INDIVIDUALS WHO WERE IN SUCH DESPERATE NEED
OF GOD’S LOVE, GRACE & ACCEPTANCE WERE
JUDGED & REJECTED BY THE CHURCH, HE WAS
FILLED WITH FRUSTRATION & ANGER.**

IT SPILLS OUT OF HIM IN THAT POWERFUL STATEMENT IN THIS PASSAGE – “*THOSE WHO SAY, ‘I LOVE GOD,’ AND HATE THEIR BROTHERS OR SISTERS, ARE LIARS.*”

WE OFTEN TALK ABOUT “THE LIVING WORD OF GOD.”

NOWHERE IS THAT MORE TRUE THAN IN A PASSAGE SUCH AS THIS.

THE WORDS OF THE BIBLE COME ALIVE HERE.

THEY SHOUT TO US ACROSS THE AGES – RESOUNDING WITH A RELEVANCE TO OUR OWN TIME & PLACE.

IF JOHN WAS ANGRY & FRUSTRATED BY THE CHURCH OF HIS OWN TIME BECAUSE OF THEIR JUDGMENTAL, SELF-RIGHTEOUS ATTITUDES – IF HE WAS CONCERNED THAT PEOPLE IN NEED OF GOD’S LOVE & ACCEPTANCE WERE INSTEAD BEING

REJECTED & SCORNE - WHAT WOULD HE THINK IF HE LOOKED AT TODAY'S CHURCH?

HATRED, BIGOTRY, SELF-RIGHTEOUSNESS, REJECTION, HYPOCRISY SEEM TO BE THE MOST-FREQUENTLY HEARD WORDS USED BY THE WORLD TO DESCRIBE THE CHURCH OF OUR DAY.

I'M AFRAID JOHN'S MESSAGE TO US WOULD PROBABLY BE THE SAME AS HIS MESSAGE TO HIS CONTEMPORARIES – *“THOSE WHO SAY ‘I LOVE GOD’ AND HATE THEIR BROTHERS & SISTERS ARE LIARS.”*

NOW ALL OF THIS SEEMS TO STRIKE A MUCH DIFFERENT TONE THAN THE WORDS WITH WHICH WE BEGAN – *“GOD IS LOVE.”*

BUT I THINK THAT'S PART OF THE POINT THAT JOHN IS MAKING HERE.

LOVE – AGAPE LOVE – DIVINE LOVE – LOVE THAT “ABIDES” WITHIN US – ISN'T SOME SUGARY SWEET,

**WEAK-KNEED, NAMBY-PAMBY ROMANTIC
SENTIMENTALITY.**

**THE KIND OF LOVE JOHN IS TALKING ABOUT IS
HARD.**

IT'S RISKY.

**IT'S A LOVE THAT'S WILLING TO TAKE A CHANCE
– A LOVE THAT DARES TO CHALLENGE & OFFEND THE
RESTRICTIVE & FEAR-FILLED MINDS OF THOSE WITH
A SHALLOW FAITH & A HOLLOW HEART.**

**IT'S A LOVE THAT UNDERSTANDS THAT TO TRULY
PRESENT CHRIST TO THE WORLD MEANS TO LOVE AS
HE LOVED – WITHOUT BARRIERS OR RESTRICTIONS.**

**THAT KIND OF LOVE IS HARD – AND IT'S
FRIGHTENING.**

**IT'S THE KIND OF LOVE THAT, FOR JESUS, LED TO
HIS CRUCIFIXION.**

BUT IT'S PRECISELY THE KIND OF LOVE THAT IS SO DESPERATELY NEEDED TODAY IF WE, AS A CHURCH, EVER HOPE TO TRULY SHOW THOSE OUTSIDE OF CHRISTIANITY WHO GOD IS – AND HOW THEIR LIVES CAN BE TRANSFORMED BY THE POWER OF JESUS CHRIST ABIDING WITH THEM.

LET'S GO BACK TO WHERE WE STARTED – BACK TO THE DIFFICULTY WE ALL EXPERIENCE IN BEGINNING SOMETHING.

I SAID, “*THE MOST CHALLENGING SENTENCE TO COMPOSE IN A SERMON IS THE FIRST ONE.*”

I FIND, QUITE OFTEN, WHEN THAT FIRST SENTENCE IS COMPLETED, I'M OKAY.

I'VE STARTED & THERE'S A GOOD CHANCE I'LL GET ON A ROLL & JUST KEEP GOING.

MAYBE THAT'S TRUE WHEN IT COMES TO SHOWING THE WORLD WHAT'S GOD'S LOVE IS LIKE.

**IT'S HARD, IT'S FRIGHTENING & IT'S DIFFICULT
TO GET STARTED.**

**BUT ONCE WE'VE BEGUN, WE MIGHT JUST GET ON
A ROLL WITH IT & KEEP RIGHT ON GOING.**

**AND SINCE I'M NOW ON A ROLL WITH THIS
SERMON, IT MIGHT BE GOOD TO REMEMBER – ON A
RELATED NOTE - WHAT THE KING SAID TO ALICE IN
WONDERLAND – *“BEGIN AT THE BEGINNING & GO ON
TILL YOU COME TO THE END. THEN STOP.”***

SO I WILL. AMEN.

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