

## “On Grandma's Lap”

Reading: 1 Corinthians 12:31b-13:13; 1 John 4:7-21

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The letters that we have included in our Bible as 1, 2, and 3 John were, we assume, written by the Apostle John, one of the closest of those Twelve who were closest to Jesus, so these words were probably written by someone who knew Jesus better than just about anyone else. That's one of those things I have to remind myself of from time to time: much of what we have in the New Testament was written by people who actually walked and lived and learned and ate with Jesus, people who saw what He did and heard what He said. Their words are directly informed by – and are often direct quotations of – the words of Jesus Himself. What's more, these books sound like they were written by someone who is getting up there in years. He often refers to his readers as “my beloved children” in a grandfatherly sort of way. He sounds like an old man looking back over his life with the peace and confidence that comes with great maturity; he has learned over time what matters and what doesn't, so he doesn't get too worked up too quickly. Some people might look at a weathered old man sitting in a rocking chair and think he is frail and weak, but this is not the case with someone like John. He has a strength as strong as an ancient oak in the middle of a forest: he's been through things young bucks like me can't imagine.

And so I think of this book as being sort of like sitting on your grandmother's lap, listening to her tell stories about those things she thinks are most important. We'll compare John to a *grandmother* rather than a *grandfather* because today is Mother's Day, so we'll recognize the wisdom and experience of our mothers and grandmothers and all those who have gone before us in the faith and made us who we are. We get the treasured opportunity to listen to the wisdom of someone who has lived long enough and well enough to have some real wisdom. John has a pretty good idea of what's important because he's seen so much, so he's distilling all his decades of life in Christ down to a few chapters of powerful words. And so we sit and we listen to the words of someone who is wiser than us.

He sounds like he repeats himself, especially if you read through the whole book. Maybe he's so old that he's forgetting what he's already said – but no, that's not the case. He repeats himself because some things are worth repeating. It's like those wise sayings your grandmother always had, like those reminders to “be open-minded, but not so open-minded that your brain falls out,” those sayings that come from wisdom that we remember and repeat because they're worth remembering and repeating.

He repeats, over and over again, the word “love.” Even though this book is only five chapters long, John uses the Greek word *agape*, meaning “love,” as a verb or a noun more than any other book in the New Testament, more, in fact, than almost any other book in the entire Bible. In fact, he's so concerned with love that he often addresses his audience as *agapetoi*, “those who are loved.” He repeats it because it's worth repeating. He says twice just in these verses for today that God is love; those are powerful words worth repeating. *God is love*. We hear those words and they can become so familiar that we almost ignore them. It's such a simple statement that we might assume its meaning is also simple. *God is love*: “Yes, yes, I've got it, everybody knows that, now let's move on to the more interesting parts of the Bible like the miracles and the end times stuff. Let's argue about how long it took God to create the universe or whether Mary had any children besides Jesus.”

The words are simple, but the meaning – you can spend the rest of your life learning about what it means. The fact that God is love and that he loves you is maybe the first and most basic thing every Christian needs to learn, but at the same time it is one of the deepest, most advanced doctrines of the church. I've been consistently surprised over the last few years as I've read some of the classic Christian devotional books, some of those books written by great saints whose work has endured for hundreds of years. I've been surprised by how simple these profound writings are. Often these towering saints of church history, who knew God so intimately and proved their love for God by suffering for his name, who forgot more about how to live for Christ than I'll ever know, wrote very simple words to pass on to future generations. They're usually not great works of biblical scholarship or groundbreaking insights into politics or culture. They're often very simple; they don't use facts and figures and theories, but they're very, very deep. *God is love* is so easy to say. *Love one another* is such a simple statement, but it can be the hardest thing to do.

John took the time to compose and write and send out a letter for the benefit of the church. He's sitting in his rocking chair, thinking about what he can say about all he has seen and learned. Maybe he could dispense some of Jesus' wise sayings that nobody has heard before. Maybe he could give the inside scoop on some of those miracles. Maybe he could tell another embarrassing story about Peter that no one else knew. But instead: *God is love, and so we should love one another.*

We think we get it, so we get impatient with John for repeating himself. But no, this needs to be repeated. We need to think about this, and then think about ourselves. How well do we really understand the love of God? We hear all about love, certainly. Everybody likes love. All you need is love, said the Beatles. Ain't love the sweetest thing? asked U2. Even the world apart from Christ understands the importance and the beauty of love. How many movies are there that tell the story of two people falling in love? How many of our most popular songs are love songs? A fairy-tale romance is apparently the best thing that can happen to you in the eyes of our world. If you're madly in love with someone you're envied, if you're single you're pitied, and some people can't understand why you're not wife-hunting or husband-hunting. That's because our world has no idea what love is. They ache for it and they abuse themselves in pursuit of it, but they have no idea where to find it.

People like to have 1 Corinthians 13 read in their weddings because I think they sense the truth of it, but they have no idea of the depth of it. They think Paul's sharing some nice thoughts about romantic love, but they don't see that the love he's talking about means that we will love one another even when we don't deserve to be loved, even when we don't feel like loving, even when the mushy feelings are long gone. Even when you're obviously wrong and I'm obviously right, I will set myself aside for your sake because I love you, Paul is saying. Loving one another is far more important than being right, it is more important than feeling good, it is more important than looking good. Do we know what it means to be really self-less? Do we have any idea what it means to put someone else before ourselves, not because we're related to them or because we like them, but because we make the choice to love them? Have we ever really shown love to someone who hates us?

One of the great movements of God in recent generations, I think, has been a rediscovery of the love of God. Talking about having a personal relationship with Jesus is a relatively new thing. It's not that previous generations of Christians didn't know that God loved them, but there has been a sort of reawakening of the fact that God loves us and we can love him in return. It is one of the

strengths of our tradition that we emphasize the truth that we can personally encounter God and know him as our Lord and Father. We have done a good job of preaching part of what John tells us, that God is love. We have not always done as good of a job, however, with the second part. John tells us that because God loves us, we should love one another. In fact, he says, when we love one another, God's love is made complete in us. In other words, the love that exists between us and God is not complete unless it overflows into love for one another. You can't have the one without the other, according to John. It is not possible to love God if you don't love those around you.

Here's an example: We believe the Bible is the word of God; we believe God uses these words to speak to us on a very deep level, and people can learn more about God through the Bible than through most other means. But I can pull verses out of here and quote them at you left and right to show you what a worthless lump you are. I can use it to give you all sorts of reasons for why you're no-good and you'd better get your act together or you're going to burn in hell for all eternity. I could quote from the word of God but not be of God, because if I'm ripping you up one side and down the other, I do not have love, and God is love. We can be correct in our facts but wrong overall, because if it is not loving, it is not of God. We can say something that is true without it being the truth, because the greatest truth of all is that God is love, and anything that is not spoken in love is not of God.

When Carey and I were living in Kentucky before we came to the Poconos, I visited a husband and wife who were members of our church. I'm not sure how long they had been married, but I know it was for many years. The wife had advanced Alzheimer's. When I met her she was incapable of doing much of anything at all on her own; she wouldn't even move unless her husband prompted her to. She was completely dependent on him: she couldn't eat or speak or walk or even go to the bathroom without him, and she wasn't going to get any better. But I learned more about love in the fifteen minutes I was in that house than I've learned anywhere else. This husband was so tender, so respectful, so loving, with his wife who didn't even know he was in the room. He was getting nothing from her at all, but she was the most important, most beautiful person in the world to him. That was love.

In 1964, a Canadian man named Jean Vanier invited two disabled men to leave the mental institution where they lived and instead come live with him in his regular home. This was the start of a worldwide network of communities where people with disabilities could live together with their caregivers in a house to eat together and share life together. The goal was more than just a caregiver treating a patient, it was for the caregivers to learn from the people they were living with every day. Vanier wrote about how he saw that it was a powerful thing to tell these people with disabilities that their lives have meaning, that they are important. We have scientists and would-be-parents today who abort children with disabilities because they think their lives are not worth living, but Vanier insists on telling them instead, "You are precious. You are important. You – not just *people*, but *you*."

Have you ever been to the doctor's office and felt more like a science project than a person? I'm sure almost every doctor out there got started in medicine because they wanted to help people, but so often along the way they started caring more about *people* than they care about *you*. The same thing happens with teachers or social workers or pastors. The same thing happens with lots of Christians, too. We know that we're called to love others, but when it comes down to it, we love what we want someone to be, not what they are now. We love disabled people because we want them to get better, we love sinners because we want them to stop sinning, we love atheists because we want

them to come to church. We love people like the world loves people: we will love you as long as you do what we want you to do and behave like we tell you. We forget that love is an end in itself, it is not a means to an end or a tool for getting what we want. We don't love people so that we can convince them to change or so that we can get them to come to church; we love people because they are precious to God, they carry the image of God, no matter how stained that image has become, they are important, and their lives have meaning.

When we come to encounter the truth of Christ, when we begin to see how he is changing us and making us more holy, when we know the holy life he is giving us, we so quickly assume that we are now qualified to tell others what they need to do to be holy like us. We assume that showing love to someone means telling them the truth, no matter how difficult that truth is. But we forget that we cannot tell them the truth until we have first loved them, because the fact that they are loved by God is the single truest truth about them.

John Wesley observed that God is often referred to as being holy or righteous or wise, but we don't see anywhere that God *is* holiness or righteousness or wisdom in the abstract. But the Apostle John, sitting here on his rocker telling us the most important things he's learned, doesn't just say that God is *loving*, he says that God is love. John Wesley says that this is therefore God's "reigning attribute," it is the most important thing we can know about him, and it makes all of God's other perfect characteristics that much more perfect and glorious.

What can we as a church do to go forward in showing love for the people around us? How can we better proclaim the truth of the love of God? The world is aching to see real love, and we can give it to them. You are precious to God. You are important. God loves you, and you are therefore able to show genuine love to the people you encounter every day. Will you choose to love?



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