

Unconditional Love

Oak Grove Presbyterian Church

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March 18, 2018 8:15 service

Portions of I John 4

*Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God;
everyone who loves is born of God and knows God.*

Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love...

No one has ever seen God;

If we love one another, God lives in us, and God's love is perfected in us...

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

There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear;

We love because God first loved us...

The commandment we have from God is this:

those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.

One of the joys of being a parish pastor is that, along with the mundane aspects of church life—fixing a leaky urinal, negotiating between groups arguing over whose responsibility it is to make the Sunday morning coffee, and deciding which bulletin cover to use for Easter Sunday--one also gets to wrestle with BIG IDEAS. Ideas like God. And love. Suffering. Grace. Even, what is the meaning of life? You get the picture.

When I was in seminary, I heard a parish pastor comment that, "One can't really be an effective pastor until one is at least 35 years old. You just don't have enough life experience until then."

It was a disturbing comment to me personally because at the time I was 24 years old and a few months away from graduation. What was I supposed to do until I was 35? Pump gas and gather LIFE EXPERIENCE? Well, I was ordained and went ahead and served as a pastor, beginning at that oh-so-tender age of 24.

But looking back now from the perspective of forty years later, I can see the wisdom of the comment.

Here's one example. I had been a parish pastor for ten years and regularly preached about God's unconditional love for us. I understood the concept intellectually. But, with the wisdom of hindsight, I realize that I really had no idea, absolutely no idea... until the life-transforming experience of becoming a parent. (Now, I trust that those of you who aren't parents are more perceptive than I was. I hope that you "get" the idea of God's unconditional love better than I did. But this was my experience.)

Let me begin by saying that I love my spouse, Kris, with all of my heart. But I fell in love with her in the first place because she treated, and continues to treat, me wonderfully.

But, as you parents know, it's not that way with kids.

Let me tell you about my first experience with parenting. Our first-born, Andy, like his siblings, is today, a *wonderful* human being. He's compassionate, polite, talented, a good worker, and I am so proud to be his dad for a lot of reasons.

But it doesn't start that way with babies.

I had wanted to be a dad for a long time, so I was delighted when we learned that Kris was pregnant.

Now, a lot of women have morning sickness for a few hours in the morning for a few months. Kris experienced the nausea and vomiting not just in the morning, but also at any and all hours of the day, and for most of the pregnancy. It seemed like every few minutes one could hear the sound of puking.

This awful pregnancy was followed by a normal delivery. And by normal I, of course, mean "*unbelievably horrible!!*" I didn't know that my wife even *knew* those words, let alone would direct them at me.

(At Andy's first checkup, the nurse would cheerfully inform us that his head circumference measured at the 95th percentile. "Yeah, we noticed.")

So, after a couple days in the hospital the staff foolishly let us take this baby home. All by ourselves. It seemed incredibly irresponsible on their part. I wanted to report them to some human services agency. Again, you parents know what I'm talking about.

Andy turned out to be one of those babies that spits up all the time. And he pooped *all* the time. We never changed a diaper that just had pee in it. And these were no ordinary poops. He had explosions, one of which came just as I was changing him. I happened to be wearing a suit at the time. And suddenly I was wearing more than that. It also covered two walls, the hand-painted curtains and about 80 square feet of carpet, fortunately brown in color.

So. I remember holding Andy when he was about two weeks old. I thought back at what he had done for me so far. He had put my beloved Kris through months of discomfort, culminating in hours of tortured labor. He had already gone through a zillion diapers. He had cost us thousands of dollars. He kept us up all night every night. And at two weeks of age, babies aren't even smiling. So he had not done *one* positive thing for me.

Yet I could not possibly love anyone or anything more.

As I held my two-week-old son and experienced this incredible sense of love for him, the light bulb turned on in my brain. It dawned on me that this is probably a microcosm of God's infinite and unconditional love for me. And for each of you.

Not because of *anything* positive we have done. Simply because of the relationship. Parent-child.

Know, dear friend, that you are the cherished child of God.