

SCRIPTURE TEXT: 1 John 4:7-12

SERMON TITLE: Love: A Core Value

In the fall of last year, our congregation engaged in a process to identify our top five core values. By values I mean those priorities and purposes that shape how we act. Through a congregational gathering and a series of cluster group meetings, five core values were identified: LOVE, FAMILY, OUTREACH, SPIRITUAL GROWTH, and HOPE. These were affirmed at our Church Conference last November. Over five Sundays we'll be preaching a series of sermons on each of these top five core values—and today we begin with LOVE. Our text is 1 John 4:7-12. Listen for the word of God. **SCRIPTURE TELLING.**

Love is a core value of this congregation. In fact, of the 40 some odd values that were identified through the congregational meeting and the cluster groups, love appeared the most frequently at the top of the list. And this comes as no surprise. Is there anyone here this morning who does not want to be loved? Not a hand goes up! We all want to be loved because deep down inside we know how utterly barren and desolate life would be without love.

But sometimes love is hard to come by. In fact, we human beings can be extraordinarily unloving toward one another. Sometimes its hatred that poisons the soul with devastating consequences—just ask a Holocaust survivor, a victim of 9/11, an abused child, or a church that's been split apart in a church fight.

And if it's not hatred that reveals our lack of love, it's the absence of caring for one another. Mother Theresa once said that *The biggest disease today is not tuberculosis or leprosy, it is being unwanted, uncared for and deserted by everyone.* (*Women's Day*, December 19, 1989, p. 87.)

Love is sometimes hard to come by. But we do want it so. We all want to be loved. That's one of the reasons why love is a core value of this congregation.

But there's another reason as well. In our longing for love, we've discovered some incredible good news. God loves us! We are God's beloved! What did we just hear from 1 John? *In this is love, not that we loved God but he loved us.* 1 John even proclaims that *God is love.*

How do we know? It's because we've come to see for ourselves that God's love has been revealed among us in Jesus Christ: *God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him....God sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins.*

You see, when it comes to love, Jesus was God's show and tell. In Jesus Christ, we've discovered that to love is to live, because both love and life come to us from a relationship with God--a relationship that God has initiated--and a relationship that God continues to pursue persistently and tenaciously even though we've been downright hostile to the idea. Love has been hard to come by even for God. Just look at the resistance to Jesus.

But God hasn't given up. God's love absorbed the hatred and the hostility. Jesus took it into his very body until it drained him of life.

But God's love for us embodied in him could not be destroyed. God wouldn't let it be destroyed. Instead, the Son sent from God became *the atoning sacrifice for our sins*—a revelation of God's undying love and commitment to us. An anonymous poet wrote:

*Jesus understood
The loving reach of God
The longing reach of men
In his life, in his death
He joined their hands together.*

This, my brothers and sisters, is the good news we offer to a love-starved world: We are loved!
God loves us!

But now for the rest of the story: There's more to love than just being loved. ***Beloved, let us love one another...everyone who loves is born of God and knows God...Beloved, since God loves us so much, we also ought to love one another...No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is completed in us.***

To put it another way, love received from God gives birth to love given away to others. Oscar Hammerstein wrote a song that says it well; I've shared it with you before: ***A bell's not a bell till you ring. A song's not a song till you sing it. Love in your hearts is not put there to stay. Love isn't love till you give it away.***

And this has profound implications for the mission of the church. We know this already. Love has already shaped what we do as a church: operating a Food Pantry to feed the hungry is an act of love, forming mission teams to help with disaster relief is an act of love, providing Stephen Ministers to people who need a friendly presence and a listening ear in times of distress is an act of love, starting a new worship service on Easter Sunday that is designed to reach people who are not a part of the church is an act of love.

So you see, love for others is evident among us which means that God is at work in us—and love will not let us rest. Love will always compel us to keep reaching outward to the least, the last and the lost—to the opponent, the adversary, and the enemy. The need for love is so great and in this time and place, we are God's show and tell. We are God's prescription for the biggest disease of our day—***being unwanted, uncared for and deserted by everyone.***

And yes, embracing love as a core value will impact how we relate to one another within the church in the midst of conflict and controversy. For example, there's a book out called ***Faith of My Fathers: Conversations with Three Generations of Pastors about Church, Ministry and Culture.*** Now these three generations of pastors are all in the same family: a grandfather, a

father and a son. In the book, they discuss issues including the use of different forms of media and music in worship, as well as issues of doctrine and biblical interpretation. The conversation even gets heated when it turns to abortion, race and the church's role in politics. This family is a microcosm of the church as we know it.

Well, the son, Chris Seay, who is the principal author the book, writes: *The ache in the church is felt right now in my family. My grandfather was a different kind of pastor from my father, and I am yet a different kind of pastor. We disagree quite passionately, and yet we...love and respect each other. We are not strangers who can easily be reduced to enemies and ignored. We are each other's sons, sharing each others blood, needing each other's affection. And so we stay, and we listen, and we attempt to understand. How I wish for something as beautiful for the church as a whole.* (Overton, Roger. Review of *Faith of My Fathers: Conversations with Three Generations of Pastors about Church, Ministry and Culture* on amazon.com.)

Love is a core value of this congregation. It's at the top of the list. And that's as it should be for *Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love.*