

God's Gift of Love and Life, Part 1  
Caldwell Memorial Presbyterian Church  
May 10, 2009  
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Scripture: 1 John 4:7-21

A few years ago a friend of the wonderful spiritual writer Henri Nouwen asked Nouwen to write something about the spiritual life. Nouwen describes his friend as a “young New York intellectual”<sup>1</sup> who worked in an office in the big city and returned to a small apartment every night to recover from the battle that was his daily life.

But now the friend wanted to know if there was more than the daily grind. He and others like him needed a word of hope and meaning, and he had turned to his friend for help and hope.

At first, Nouwen didn't know how to respond. But he took the request seriously. He tried to think of one word that might convey God's hope and safekeeping in a world that so often rejects us and, in turn, fuels our own self-rejection.

The word Nouwen came up with was “beloved.”

The world shouts “You are no good, you are ugly; you are worthless; you are despicable, you are nobody,” Nouwen wrote.

But don't listen to them, he continued, because: “We are the Beloved. We are intimately loved long before our parents, teachers, spouses, children and friends loved or wounded us. That's the truth of our lives. That's the truth I want you to claim for yourself. That's the truth spoken by the voice that says, “You are my Beloved.”

That voice, that source of strength and affirmation that Nouwen heard, must have been the same voice that the writer of the book of 1 John heard.

“Beloved let us love one another, because love is from God ....”

So begins the seventh verse of the fourth chapter of 1 John and at that point in his epistle the author is in full stride. This letter we find at the back of the New Testament was written to counter a variety of claims that God did not come into the world in the flesh in Jesus Christ.

But God did, the author of 1 John assures us, and in so doing God gave us the gift of love, and in that gift is life.

Henri Nouwen's claim, that we are, if nothing else, the beloved, is the heart of 1 John. It's a claim that can be boiled down even more, to three words. God is love.

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<sup>1</sup> All Nouwen quotes from [Life of the Beloved](#).

We can stop there, if we want to. That is, after all, as good a truth as we can hear.

But these verses, the very pinnacle of this little letter, offer so much more. They are a perfect example of the unending richness of Holy Scripture, a reminder that we can read this book for our entire lives without plumbing its depths and traveling its breadth.

If we pause and dwell on the words and thoughts we find in these 14 verses, we find an expression of life with God that can guide us for years to come.

So I would like for us to do just that – pause and listen and ponder how this little letter unlocks the life of faith and makes it so accessible, so reachable and understandable. On page 7 of your bulletin (see bottom of this document), I've sketched out how these verses flow. Perhaps it is because it's baseball season and I catch a few innings on TV from time to time, or perhaps I am channeling some subconscious dream of a Caldwell church softball team, but the picture unfolded to me as a diamond, like a baseball diamond.

So, today, I propose we start at home at the bottom of the diagram, plant our spikes firmly in the dirt and take a run down the first base line. Next week, we circle around back to home. Are you with me? All right, then.

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Do you remember when the media was talking about whether our President was getting “overexposed” in his first month in office ... popping up in too many places, too many contexts, being more visible than he should be?

That's the way it is with love in our culture, isn't it? To be such a sublime thing, our society bounces the idea of love around like a beach ball in a crowd. On the radio. In the movies. On the internet. Even in those old-fashioned things called books. In television advertisements, the Hallmark card company, those 1-800-flower delivery businesses, jewelry retailers, even car manufacturers like Lexus with its big red bow want us to believe that we really don't love someone – a parent, a friend, a spouse, whomever – unless we show that love with their product.

But the love that 1 John speaks of is its own kind. It is *agape* love, which is different from romantic or brotherly love. This love is self-less and self-giving. God is source of this love, as these verses tell us, love is from God.

Now, I want you to stop and think for a moment. Actually I hope you've been thinking up to now but if now this is your chance to redeem yourself. Try to remember when you learned how to love. Who taught you? How old were you? What were you doing at the time?

Of course we have no answers for that. We learned to love by being loved.

On this Mother's Day, we give particular thanks for those who taught us to love by loving us from the very beginning, from before we can remember. Responding to our cries to be fed or simply to be held when we knew nothing else. Or, we may know other forms of a mother's love in other circumstances, perhaps a source of reassurance in our teen years or a source of wisdom when we were young adults.

But as unique and endlessly self-giving as a mother's love can be, even our mothers are not the authors of this kind of unconditional devotion. We may recognize God's love in our mothers' love, but it is God's love first, then handed down by generation after generation of those who lived out scripture's instruction to love others.

We know God's love most purely, though, not through any other person, however important they may be to us. We know it through Jesus Christ. As 1 John says:

In this is love, not that we loved God but that God loved us and sent a Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. (vv.10-11)

Here again, we can take in these words casually as a familiar if not fundamental idea. Or we can savor them as a profoundly compact statement of theology, the knowledge of God.

One of the best theology-in-a-nutshell explanations I've heard is that we can think about life with God as a simple sentence. So go with me back to third-grade grammar for a moment.

God is always the subject of the sentence. God acts. God creates. God gives every good and perfect thing. God protects. God goes ahead and comes behind. God anoints our heads with oil. I could literally go on all day.

If God, then, is the subject of the sentence, God's preferred verb is to love. That leaves us as the direct object in this nutshell theology. We receive God's forgiveness and God's forbearance. We are the ones loved by God, a love shown to us in human form in Christ. But God is always the actor, the subject of the sentence.

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In Christ, God offers us life. Christ said he was the vine that connects us to God and we are the branches that live and grow, drawing strength from the vine and the root.

Thus, the author of 1 John says, we abide with God. I am in favor of that word "abide" making a comeback in our modern English. It conveys a sense of peaceful presence, what one author has called God's encompassing embrace. The book of Acts says that in God in Christ "we live and move and have our being." (17:28)

To abide is to accept God's invitation of faith, to be in relationship. That's one of the great blessings of our community here at Caldwell. Our sign out front and the cover of our Sunday bulletins say it in five words. God invites. We welcome. All.

On any given Sunday, there are no more than 10 people among us who have been here longer than 2 and half years. In that short amount of time – and it is a short amount of time for a church – we have all been invited to be here.

Our predecessors, including Sue Aivaz, whose honor we recognized earlier, abided with and by those who came in from the outside. And those newcomers abided in harmony with their Caldwell forefathers and mothers.

In turn, we now seek to abide with and by all those who come to consider whether Caldwell is their church home. To abide is to make a promise, to say that we will be here for each other through life's twists and turns.

Certainly you have abided by and with me and my family as I have begun to learn how to be a pastor and preacher over the last year. Thanks be to God. And you have invited me into your lives, to abide with you through ups and downs. But what we do here is not about me or you so much as it is about our faith and how we continually accept God's invitation into relationship.

"Abiding in Jesus," writes New Testament teacher David Rensberger," has both an inward and an outward dimension. Inwardly, it is a ceaseless orientation toward Jesus, a constant looking to him, listening for his voice, seeking his ways. Outwardly, it is refusing every temptation to turn elsewhere for security, companionship, or hope. Those who abide in Jesus know the gladness of living with him, and for that reason they prove remarkably stubborn in their unwillingness to serve, obey or even listen to anyone else."

"Seeing these two dimensions together," Rensberger continues, "we see that to abide in Jesus is to place Jesus, both devotion to him and discipleship to him, above all else. It means letting other voices, other invitations – to profit, to pleasure, sometimes even to safety and self-preservation – go unheeded."<sup>2</sup>

That, friends, is a lot to get out of a little word like "abide," and it should give us more than enough to think about until next week. Besides, the first base coach has his hands up. He's giving us the sign to pull up and stop at first base. So we will.

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In closing, as I studied these verses from 1 John, I was reminded again of that wonderful line from the musical adaptation of Victor Hugo's classic book about the French revolution, *Les Miserables*. I've quoted it to you before. In his dying hours, the hero of the story, who has lived through heaven and hell on earth, looks adoringly at his

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<sup>2</sup> Weavings: A Journal of the Christian Spiritual Life, March/April 2007

daughter, his only true love, and says the words, “To love another person is to see the face of God.”

It is a lovely notion, one that has come to mean something to both Kelly and me.

But, as I said about love earlier, it, too, suffers from overexposure in our media- and internet-driven culture.

If you Google that phrase, you’ll find that it’s used in the marketing of everything from e-Harmony.com to the fast-growing hobby of scrapbooking, which, by the way, has become a big deal.

Alas, I thought to myself, we can cheapen anything.

Thankfully, though, it seems that the likes of e-Harmony.com have yet to find the little letter of 1 John there in the way-back of the New Testament.

Perhaps we can keep it that way, because these are precious words indeed.

“Beloved, since God loves us so much, we also ought to love one another ... if we love one another, God lives in us and God’s love is perfected in us.”

To God be the glory,

Amen.



