

**Love and Light:
It's All About Love!**

I John 4:7-21

God's love empowers us to love one another.

A sermon preached by
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The 1999 movie *Tuesdays with Morrie*, based on the book by the same name, is the true story of a sports writer, Mitch Albom, and his reunion with his former college professor, Morrie Schwartz, who was stricken with ALS (Lou Gehrig's disease), a progressive and incurable disease. Albom is a multitasking workaholic, whose life is a series of hurried appointments, rushed phone calls, and last-minute sprints to catch a flight. When he discovers that his former college professor and friend is in the last stages of ALS, he honors a long-overdue promise to visit. The first visit becomes a series of weekly visits every Tuesday

In these visits, Morrie teaches Mitch some important lessons about what matters most in life. Morrie is sometimes patient with Mitch's superficiality, but one day Morrie confronts Mitch with some painful truths.

Morrie is very frail, and is lying in a recliner in obvious pain. He grimaces and asks Mitch to rub his aching feet with salve. "When we're infants," says Morrie, "we need people to survive; when we're dying, we need people to survive; but here's the secret: in between, we need each other even more."

Mitch nods and responds with a quote that he has heard Morrie say many times. "We must love one another or die."

Morrie loses patience with Mitch. "Yeah, but do you believe that? Does it apply to you?"

Mitch is stunned and defensive as he confesses that he doesn't know what he believes. The world he lives in doesn't allow for the contemplation of spiritual things.

Morrie pushes a little harder. "You hate that word, don't you—*spiritual*? You think it's just touchy-feely stuff, huh?"

"I just don't understand it," says Mitch.

"We must love one another or die," says Morrie. "It's a very simple lesson, Mitch."¹

It's a very simple lesson, but that doesn't mean it's easy. It's the fundamental principle of the Christian life, but that doesn't mean we always get it or always do it. That's why it is repeated over and over throughout the New Testament, and particularly in this First Letter of John. Our love for one another goes to the very heart of the universe, the basic character of our existence, even the nature of God. Our text begins today, "*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."² Simple, but somehow not so easy to understand. So many people think of God in terms of judgment, wrath, anger and punishment. But that's not the true Christian picture of God at all. We don't worship love; we worship God. But God's nature and name is love, and there is no way the two can be separated.

All love comes from God. Any love we show for God and any love we show for one another was first initiated by God: "*We love because God first loved us.*"³ We know God's love because we see what God did in Jesus Christ, God's only Son: "*God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins.*"⁴ Jesus gave up heaven to live as a human being, to live with all the limitations of humanity, to suffer and die on the cross, so that we could be forgiven of our sins and know a relationship of love with our heavenly Father.

This is what love means. It's not a touchy-feely thing. It's less about emotions than it is about will. Love takes sacrifice. Sometimes love is tough business. You know this if you love somebody, if you're married to somebody, or if you have a child.

This week I spotted an anniversary tribute on FaceBook written by a friend of mine, but it was different than the gushy romantic sayings you usually read. She wrote, "10,958 days...1,565.3 weeks...360 months...30 years!! How can it be? Commitment. Devotion. Love as a decision, not an emotion. Dedication. Prayer. Respect. LOTS of deep breaths. God. Family. Laughter. LOTS of laughter. Patience. FRIENDS. Worship. Conversation. Forgiveness. Grace. Understanding. Listening. Learning to disagree. Space. Shared values. Eye rolls. LOTS of eye rolls. Counseling (we have the best). Vacations...lots of vacations. Work hard. Play hard. Date nights. ...That foundation is how..."⁵

That's a pretty good description of love. All our love is a response to the love God has given us. Because God has so

loved us, then we not only love God in return, but we love God's children as well. The text says, "*Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another.*"⁶

A few years ago, *Time* magazine had an article about a saint named Sister Emmanuelle—which of course means "God with us." A Catholic nun and teacher, her heart was broken by the plight of the poor in Cairo, Egypt, who lived in the city garbage dump. In 1971, she went to live with them and stayed 22 years. These people were the untouchables. They lived in a vicious cycle of poverty, passing down their lifestyle to children and grandchildren, who also lived in the dump. They sorted through the refuse that was hauled in by donkey carts from the city, scavenging for bottles and cans and food to feed their pigs that roamed freely through their makeshift homes.

Sister Emmanuelle gathered the children every day to teach them to read. Christian, Muslim, non-religious, she took them all in and gave them a vision of a wider world outside the dump. She walked around the dump, waving away the swarms of flies, carefully recording the needs of each family. She was gentle with the garbage-pickers, but she was tough as nails with officials and bureaucrats when she would advocate for the poor. She told *Time* magazine: "My job is to prove that God is love, to bring courage to these people. ...I wouldn't want to be anywhere else because here I feel I am giving the life of Jesus Christ to the children."⁷

We prove God is love by loving one another. When our lives are filled with love, two things are crowded out: fear and hate. Our Scripture says, "*There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love.*"⁸ If we are afraid that God is out to judge and punish us, then of course we are fearful all the time. But if our God is a God of love, we respond in love, and we have peace and joy. Fear pulls in and covers up; love opens up. Fear is narrow and constricted; love is wide like open arms. Fear tries to protect what we have because it's not safe; love tries to share what we have, because it's all a gift from God. Love casts out fear.

People who know love cannot hate, either. I know we have to work on this sometimes—simple, but not easy, right? There

are some things in the world that are evil, and we should hate those things. Injustice, oppression, prejudice, violence, poverty, abuse—feel free to hate those things. But if we love, we cannot hate people: “*Those who say, ‘I love God,’ and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen.*”⁹ Love of God and hatred of people cannot co-exist, because hate denies the sacred worth and dignity that God gives to every single person. We can oppose evil people, and we can resist evil people. But we cannot hate even the worst person we know, because hatred commits spiritual violence against another and perpetuates the cycle of evil.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., faced the forces of racial hatred with the soul force of love and non-violence. In his last book, entitled *Chaos or Community: Where Do We Go From Here?*—still a good question—King wrote, “Returning violence for violence multiplies violence, adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars. Darkness cannot drive out darkness: only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate, only love can do that.”¹⁰ Love drives out fear and hatred.

In the end, where we want to end up is a word that has been floating around throughout this sermon series. We want to *abide* in God and for God to *abide* in us. Our Scripture says, “*God abides in those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God, and they abide in God. ...God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.*”¹¹ Last week we talked about this verb in terms of an ongoing, permanent relationship with God. The Greek word is *meno*, and it is also translated remain, stay, dwell, and endure. Theologian Jean Vanier defined “abide” this way: “To abide in Jesus is to make our home in him and to let Jesus make his home in us.”¹² Don’t you love that? We make our home in Christ, and Christ makes his home in us. That’s abiding. How do you do that? Same thing we said last week—confess your faith in Jesus Christ as the Son of God and love one another. That’s how Jesus comes to live in you.

We celebrate the abiding presence of Jesus every time we celebrate Holy Communion. Whenever we take Communion, we do three things. We remember the past, as we commemorate the Last Supper of Jesus with his disciples on the night before

he died. We also look forward to the future, as we anticipate gathering with Jesus around the table at the Messiah's banquet in heaven. But we also believe, every time we take Communion, that Jesus is alive in us. He dwells in us. He abides in us. That's the point of the bread and juice. These elements are more than symbolic. They convey into us the life of Jesus, the Holy Spirit of God. They are spiritual gifts in physical form, so that we can welcome Jesus into our body. When we ingest the Body and Blood of Christ in Holy Communion, it is literally, as Paul said, "*Christ in you, the hope of glory.*"¹³

James Howell described what happened at that first Communion this way: "Jesus gave his body and blood to his disciples in bread and wine. Amazed at such a token, and with little understanding what they did, Peter, John, and the rest reached out their hands and took their master and their God. Whatever else they knew or did not know, they knew they were committed to him... and that they, somehow, should live it out."¹⁴

Living out the Christian life is simple but not easy: believe in the Lord Jesus; love one another, obey his commandment. Our text ends with these words: "*The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.*"¹⁵ And we're right back where we started.

This is the sum and substance of the Christian faith: love God, and love one another. Do this, and you will live. Don't do this, and you will die. It's a simple lesson, Mitch. Learn it.

¹ *Tuesdays with Morrie* (Touchstone, 1999), produced by Oprah Winfrey and Kate Forte, directed by Mick Jackson. Youtube <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E463tZdAGn4>, start at 1:11:00.

² I John 4:7-8.

³ I John 4:19.

⁴ I John 4:9-10.

⁵ Lori Martin Standridge, FaceBook post, April 27, 2021.

⁶ I John 4:11.

⁷ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/S%C5%93ur_Emmanuelle.

⁸ I John 4:18.

⁹ I John 4:19-20.

¹⁰ Martin Luther King, Jr., *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?* (1967), <http://www.csmonitor.com/USA/2011/0117/Martin-Luther-King-Day-10-memorable-MLK-quotes/Hate-cannot-drive-out-hate>.

¹¹ I John 4:15-16.

¹² James Howell, “Weekly Preaching May 2, 2021,” *MinistryMatters.com*.

¹³ Colossians 1:27.

¹⁴ Howell, *op. cit.*

¹⁵ I John 4:21.