



## Jonathan Edwards isn't my Homeboy

1 John 3:11-20

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This fall, we are reading through the book *Wholehearted Faith*, by the late Rachel Held Evans. I again encourage you, if you haven't already, to pick up a copy and read along. Each Sunday after worship we are offering a book study to dive deeper into the reading, providing time for sharing your personal stories of faith, and offering a time to consider in greater depth the invitation to wholehearted faith.

This morning, I'll be looking at chapter 6 in the book, which Held Evans titles, "Jonathan Edwards isn't my Homeboy."

For this title to make any sense, and for us to connect the book with our scripture for the day, we will need to do some historical study regarding Jonathan Edwards.

Edwards was, as Wikipedia defines him, an "American revivalist, preacher, philosopher, and Congregationalist theologian." Edwards was born in East Windsor, Connecticut in 1703. (For a frame of reference, this was the same year that John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, was born.) Edwards was a preacher's kid, doubled over; both his father and his maternal grandfather were pastors. He entered Yale College at the age of 13, graduated at 17, and became a pastor at the age of 19. Continuing in school, he finished his Masters at Yale at the age of 20.

It should be clear from this timeline that Edwards was skilled at education. His intellectual status was only surpassed by the piety of his faith.

In 1729, he became the lead pastor at his grandfather's church, the Northampton Church, which was described as "the most important in Massachusetts outside of Boston." His preaching and his writing became widely known, his church grew in significant number, and he became a well-known figure in the Great Awakening movement among American Christianity.

By the 1740s, Edwards had defined his position in stark contrast to many of the other Great Awakening pastors. While a common theme among the Great Awakening was the invitational love of God, which elicited a strong emotional response amidst revival attendees, Edwards rebuked the emotional sermons and employed the "preaching of terror."<sup>ii</sup> This is perhaps best witnessed in (what is perhaps) Edward's most famous sermon, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God."

By the end of the 1740s, even his pastoral approach at Northampton Church had become so restrictive that he limited who could receive communion, insisting that only those who had made a public profession of faith were of genuine faith, and thus worthy of participating in the Lord's Supper. At this, and other concerns, with a vote of 200 to 23, the church exited him from the pulpit.

But Edwards' preaching was in high demand elsewhere. His writings and sermons became a standard among 18<sup>th</sup> Century Calvinism. While his influence decreased in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, following the Civil War, his words took favor again in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century by theologians reacting against an increase in the so-called "liberalism of the American Protestant church."

To give you just a flavor of Edward's approach to faith, Rachel Held Evans offers one passage from the sermon, *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*. In 1741, Edwards wrote, "The God that holds you over the pit of Hell, much as one holds a spider, or some other loathsome insect, over the fire, abhors you, and is dreadfully provoked; his wrath toward you burns like fire; he looks upon you as worth of nothing else, but to be cast in to the fire; he is of purer eyes than to bear to have you in his sight; you are ten thousand times so abominable in his eyes as the most hateful venomous serpent is in ours."<sup>iii</sup>

This kind of preaching follows the doctrine of total depravity, which teaches "that our sin renders us unworthy of God's love and therefore undeserving of any goodness or joy in life."<sup>iv</sup>

Instead of being invited to faith because of an invitational love of God, this framework toward faith insists that the wrath of God should be expected, for, as a people, we are inherently sinful following the Original Sin of the first of humanity in the Garden of Eden. As Held Evans notes, "In some way or other," because of this kind of teaching by the Church, "many of us have become convinced that we will never be worthy of love – because of our sin, because of our humanity, and because of something that happened in a mysterious garden a long time ago."<sup>v</sup>

In this shameful framework of theology, the teaching drills into you that you are unworthy of God's love. This kind of preaching is designed to guilt you into thinking you will never be good enough for God.

*But is that really what the Bible proclaims?* In truth, one doesn't need to read too deep in the scriptures to understand that the love of God for you ... for me ... for us as humanity ... the love of God is the very cornerstone of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. I'll take that a step further, as we spent all summer studying, the common thread of the Biblical text, from Genesis to Revelation, *is* God's invitational love. It was God's love that created humanity in the Garden. It was God's love that offered the covenant, so that we might be in greater relationship with God. It was God's love that called prophets to order our faithfulness. It was God's love which was in-fleshed in the person of Jesus. And it *is* God's love that continues to call us together as one humanity into a unified gathering of praise and celebration around the glory of the Lord.

Now, I've heard this argument, and I've seen many theological rants on social media to this effect, so it's worth naming: among those who hold firm to the doctrine of total depravity, there are many that would say that any focus on God's expansive love is simply the liberal protestant church giving in to cultural changes. Such an invitational focus by the Church is cursed as a cheap marketing ploy and a watering down of the gospel.

But my friends, one doesn't need to appropriate cultural changes to make such a claim, they simply need to read the Bible. While there are many texts that we could use to understand God's invitational love, this morning, I want to look more deeply at 1 John 3:11-20.

The Epistle of John, letters 1, 2, and 3, are something of an essay on the Gospel of John. The First Epistle of John carries with it two primary focuses. First, that “we should believe in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ,” and second, “we should love one another as [Christ] has loved us.”<sup>vi</sup>

Beginning in verse 11, we hear the conviction of the writer, who states that the message to love is not something new, but has been a part of God’s desire from the beginning.

Now, keep in mind, this text in 1 John was written just before the end of the 1<sup>st</sup> Century. So, a little over 1,900 years ago, in the first 60 or so years following Jesus’ death and resurrection, the immediate commentary on the life of the Christian by Christian evangelists was that we should love one another because this is something God has said is necessary dating back to creation.

This focus on love – God’s love, or our love for one another – is not new. Regardless how many theobros want to claim a Jonathan Edwards approach to faith, or chastise those who focus on God’s love as being too liberal, this invitation is literally part of the Biblical text. How’s that for inerrancy?

To prove his point, the Epistle writer quotes one of the earliest stories of the Hebrew Scriptures. He writes, “We must not be like Cain, who was from the evil one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his own deeds were evil and his brother’s righteous.”

This text is gold. Why did Cain hate his brother? The author tells us: Cain was actually the evil one, but he didn’t want to be known as the evil one. And so, he decided to kill his brother so that his brother’s mere existence as a righteous man couldn’t highlight just how evil he (Cain) was.

Now, I’m not going to chase this rabbit down the hole, but it feels like there’s a commentary here on Jonathan Edwards being focused on how evil *he* is, and his need to try and destroy those whom he saw as being more righteous, because their righteousness highlighted just how evil he was. This is projection at its finest. But I digress.

Following up on the story of Cain, the Epistle author writes, “We know that we have passed from death to life because we love one another. Whoever does not love abides in death.”

The call to love one another is heavy handed in this text, and the author says such a necessity dates back to the very beginning of God’s created humanity.

Now, before we keep reading, I want to anticipate the argument that is being formulated against my own sermon. My opening response to Jonathan Edwards and the doctrine of total depravity is that *God loves us*. Edwards, and all who continue to teach and preach among his theological grandchildren, miss the Biblical proclamation of God’s invitational and expansive love. Yet, as we look at 1 John 3:11-15, I have highlighted that the invitation of the author is that *we ought to love one another*. The focus connects back to two individuals, Cain and Abel, and the lack of love Cain had for Abel.

As we progress in this text, the author very quickly makes the connection between our love for one another and God’s love for us. Indeed, the author writes, it is only because of God’s love for us that we even know what love for one another looks like.

Beginning verse 16, we read, “We know love by this, that he laid his life down for us – and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. How does God’s love abide in anyone who has the world’s goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses to help?”

In her commentary, Judith Lieu recaps the Epistle, writing, “Jesus’ readiness to lay down his life can be, and must be, imitated.”<sup>vii</sup> This echoes Jesus’ own teaching, where Jesus himself told the disciples that just as he washed their feet, so too must they wash the feet of others. It is clear, because of God’s love for us, as witnessed in Jesus Christ, we must also love one another.

The Epistle writer hammers in this necessity to have love. Back in verse 14, the author writes, “Whoever does not love abides in death. All who hate a brother or sister are murderers, and you know that murderers do not have eternal life abiding in them.”

Again, he’s connecting back to the story of Cain, but in so doing, he’s making a firm argument that there is no middle ground in this faith-requirement to love. You either love, or you are filled with death. If you have hatred for a brother or sister, you might as well kill them for those who hate do not have the light of Christ, for Christ is the in-fleshed witness of God, who is love. You cannot hate one another and also have the love of God in you.

But in his closing remarks, the author makes clear that love is not simply the absence of hatred. Love is tangible and actionable. Beginning in verse 18, the author writes, “Let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.”

Professor D. Moody Smith, picking up on the Epistle writer’s call to love, offers, “Love in ‘word or speech’ is not really love at all.” He goes on, saying, “John seems to abhor speech, even sound theological speech, that is not undergirded by a corresponding willingness to act in love toward one’s fellow believer.” Smith concludes, “Love is not just a special way of feeling; it is an orientation of life and action.”<sup>viii</sup>

And here’s where Jonathan Edwards and his homeboys have really failed to read the Biblical text. To say that we are broken to the extent that we are unworthy of God’s love is to miss the very nature and call of God’s love. Indeed, John, and most of the Biblical authors, would say that we are broken and in need of God’s love. Which is precisely why God sent Christ, so that our brokenness might be redeemed and we might become capable of loving, just as God loves us.

And because that is what God has done for us in Jesus Christ, we have become capable of doing what we could not on our own. In fact, because of what God has done for us, we are not only capable of loving, but it is now part of our nature as those who are in Christ. Indeed, if we abide in Christ, then Christ abides in us, which means that the very presence of God, which is love, abides in us.

And here’s where the lineage of Edwards *really* fails. Because we are filled with the love of God, how we interact and engage in the world should represent the love of God. And that love, the Epistle writer claims, should be tangible and actionable.

Which means, we cannot simply say that we love one another, we cannot simply love in word and speech, we must engage in the world in loving ways. If you have hatred, you bring death ... if you have love, you must be actively working to bring life and to end death.

That is to say, that if there are members of your community facing higher infant mortality rates, it is the God-divined response of love to determine why, and to work with those community members to provide greater infant health. If there are members of the community facing homelessness and dying on our streets, it is the God-divined response of love to figure out housing so that we might offer them a better chance at life. If there are members of the community being targeted by hate crimes, it is the God-divined response to offer them protection and to care for them and give them a safe space to belong. If there are members of the community being targeted by unjust banking, housing, or policing laws, it is the God-divined response of love to advocate, vote, and change the systematic structures that limit life for those members of our community.

There is too much work of love for any one of us to do, which is why God calls all of the created humanity to share in this work.

But ultimately, beyond all of this, here's why Jonathan Edwards *really* isn't my homeboy – if we're too focused on why people are broken ... if we're too focused on why *others* got it wrong ... if we're too focused on how God must hate someone because they're different, or have differing opinions than us, or because, like Cain, we need to tear them down because we're insecure with our own failures, then we can't do what God has actually called us to do: and that's to love, because God first loved us. We are called to let the love of God abide in us, that we might respond when someone has a need. We are gifted to love so that our community might be a place of peace and wholeness. We are shown what it is to love so that we might be like Christ – to literally be Christ-ian – offering ourselves so that others might have life, just as Christ gave himself up for us.

We don't have time – much less a scriptural mandate – to try and convince the world that it is broken beyond repair. Anyone with eyes to see can acknowledge the hurt and pain that is felt among God's global creation. What we do have is a Biblical invitation to faith, which leads us to become part of the Body of Christ, which is defined as the witness of God's love in the world – offering healing and hope, promise and invitation, community and new life to all of God's created humanity. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> "Jonathan Edwards." June 5, 2023. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Jonathan-Edwards>. Retrieved September 21, 2023.

<sup>ii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>iii</sup> Jonathan Edwards. "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," as quoted in *Wholehearted Faith*.

<sup>iv</sup> Rachel Held Evans. *Wholehearted Faith*. HarperOne, 2021.

<sup>v</sup> Held Evans.

<sup>vi</sup> David L. Bartlett. *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 2*. Eds. David L Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008.

<sup>vii</sup> Judith M Lie. *I, II, & III John: The New Testament Library*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008.

<sup>viii</sup> D. Moody Smith. *First, Second, and Third John: Interpretation, A Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1991.