



## **Beginning Again with Love**

**1 John 4:7-12**

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In these early fall weeks, we are gleaning from the writing of the late Rachel Held Evans in her book *Wholehearted Faith*. Last week, we looked at the detrimental teaching of Jonathan Edwards, an 18<sup>th</sup> Century preacher whose teaching started and ended with the depravity of humanity, and his belief that, because of our depravity, we are only deserving of God's wrath and anger.

If we can fully move past the harm his teaching has done (and continues to do), it will be because of our willingness and ability to reframe our understanding of God using the Biblical concept of love.

In chapter 7, in an essay titled, "Beginning again with love," Held Evans takes us back to the very beginning. She invites us to consider a different perspective of the creation story and the mistake that Adam and Eve made in partaking of the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge. She invites us to consider what we know about the fruit-eating incident, and the fallout that happened in the wake of this cosmic event.

Think about the Garden – think again about the Biblical record of Adam and Eve – what do we know? ... As we read in Genesis, we learn that God created humanity. We know that humanity was the closest of creation to God, being formed in the "image of God." We know that God told Adam and Eve they could eat everything in the garden except one thing – the fruit of the tree in the center of the garden. We know there was a serpent who convinced Eve that eating the fruit wouldn't be the worst thing in the world, and that, quite the contrary, eating the fruit would allow her to know the difference between good and evil, and in this way, she would be like God. We know that Adam was also given some of the fruit to eat.

We also know that, in response to their eating the fruit, Adam and Eve had their eyes "opened," and became aware that they were naked.

God happened to be walking through the garden shortly after they had eaten the fruit, and Adam and Eve hid themselves. Regarding the immediate response of God, Held Evans comments, "[The story] describes in fanciful, nonliteral terms why childbirth is painful and why farming is hard and why snakes crawl on the ground."

God names these three direct punishments, and Adam and Eve were driven out of the Garden.

In highlighting all that the story does say, we should also pay attention to what the text does not say. "Nothing in the first three chapters of Genesis or in the rest of the Hebrew Scripture, for that matter, suggests that the choice made by Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden permanently and negatively

altered their nature, forever damaging the image of God within them and transmitting that damage like a congenital disease to every person on Earth.”<sup>i</sup>

The story, at best, highlights the unquenchable thirst of humanity to usurp the knowledge of God to know right from wrong – good from evil – apart from God. It was that knowledge, the question of knowing good and evil, that was at the core of the tempter’s invitation. Recall, Genesis 3:5 says, “The serpent said to the woman, “God knows that when you eat of [the tree in the middle of the garden] your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”” In response, Held Evans wonders, “perhaps the story of Adam and Eve isn’t about a single moment ... but rather about the many moments in which human beings face a choice between independence and interdependence.”<sup>ii</sup>

For some, this thought experiment offers little to the invitation of modern discipleship. But, as is clear from the writings of Jonathan Edwards, what we think about the story of Adam and Eve can shape our entire theological understanding of God – and thus, shape our understanding of ourselves. As Held Evans writes, “If the primary story we tell about ourselves is that, ever since the garden, our sin nature makes us incapable of doing good and unworthy of love and belonging, then we will live like people who are incapable of doing good and unworthy of love and belonging.” However, if “the primary story we tell about ourselves is that we are God’s good and beloved creation, made in the image of the divine and worthy of love no matter our sins and failures, then we will live into that reality and seek it out in one another.”<sup>iii</sup>

And, guess what? ... We don’t have to make an arbitrary decision regarding which of those stories is the good and faithful story to tell. Shockingly, after Genesis and the narrative of creation, there are 65 more books in the Bible we can use to help us understand what God thinks of us as the created humanity. And, understanding how God thinks of us, we can better shape how we think of ourselves.

To offer some clarifying thoughts on this, we are going to look at 1 John, chapter 4.

As we named last week, the Epistle letters of John – First, Second, and Third John – are explanatory essays on the Gospel of John. The letters were written around the turn of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Century, in a time when the newly minted Christian community was “defining itself in the Greco-Roman world.”<sup>iv</sup> The author is using the Gospel proclamation to help the new communities of Christian faith understand their purpose and how to live in greater faithfulness together.

In our passage this morning, found in verses 7-12, the author is making three very specific claims: first, God is love; second, we know God is love because of what God has done for us; and third, since God is love and has loved us in this way, we should also love one another.

Let’s look at these three claims in greater detail, and reflect on how this text invites us to reconsider the story of Adam and Eve’s error in the garden.

The Epistle author begins, “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.”

In this opening, the author divides humanity into two groups: those who *love* (who know God), and those who *do not love* (who do not know God). “The one who loves demonstrates that [they are] born of God and knows God. ... Yet failure to love invalidates any claim to know God.”<sup>v</sup>

This kind of proclamation, at least for me, comes across as quite vague. Its ambiguity is perhaps part of the problem causing our dissention in the Church today. When you hear this text with its firm proclamation that you do not know God if you do not love, what do you think it means by love?

In our modern proclivities to Valentine’s Day sentimentality, we often try to define love as offering a variety of romantic gestures. Love is like a box of chocolates. Love is like a bouquet of roses. Love is like cooking dinner for your partner when they get stuck late at work. Love is like a million little things that tell your significant other how important they are to you.

This is not the love of which the author speaks. And honestly, very few people today debate that the love of God is like that of a couple struck by Cupid’s arrows.

At least in the church, the debate around love as referenced in the Epistle of John hinges on two possibilities. (And, as with all gross generalizations, there are greater nuances that we don’t have time to get into right now ... but come to our small group after worship and we can dive deeper together!) The two forms of love the church usually debates are this: 1) our love is either our intentional and thorough chastisement of those who we believe are living in sin so that we might re-direct them toward a more faithful path, or 2) love is focusing less on what someone may be doing wrong and instead invite them to claim the image of God that defines their very existence. One on hand, love is punitive and seen as a form of negative reinforcement. On the other hand, love is seen as an intentional invitational exercise.

You can probably hear the two options Rachel Held Evans noted earlier in these two forms of love. The first kind of love focuses on the brokenness of humanity, and the second kind of love focuses on humanity as the beloved creation of God.

Both are understood by their respective followers as being true love. Is this a both/and scenario? Are both actually forms of love as described in John’s Epistle letters?

Let’s keep reading, picking up on verses 9 and 10.

The author writes, “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 love, not that we loved God but that [God] loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins.”

In these two verses, we hear a strong conviction by the Epistle writer that God’s love is not ambiguous. The love that is being defined is revealed in a “concrete, historical deed.” As Scholar Judith Lieu writes, “The [Epistle] author reiterates that love is expressed in and is defined only by what God has done as an act of love.”<sup>vi</sup>

In this text, the author is not allowing for any ambiguity regarding our definition of love. As far as the scripture relates, *love* is clearly defined. God is love. Such love is understood, known, and defined by what God has done for us in Jesus Christ.

Now, to the naysayers who would say I'm cherry-picking 1 John 4 to make this argument – comb through the rest of the Biblical text. You know I don't think any scriptural passage rests on its own. Look at all the ways the early Christian community defined love. 1 Corinthians 13 defines love as what God has done for us in Jesus Christ, using such phrases as, "love is patient, and kind," "love puts up with all things," and saying "if I don't have love, I just a clashing cymbal." Colossians 3 says, "put on love, which is the perfect bond of unity." 1 Peter says, "love brings about the forgiveness of many sins."

Throughout the text, love is defined as God's initiative, expressed in the person of Jesus Christ, to help bring God's created people together. God's love is not divisive, it is invitational.

And this is the Epistle author's third point. Picking up in verse 11 we read, "Beloved, since God loved 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."

If God is love, and we know what this love is because of what God has done for us in becoming in-fleshed in the person of Jesus Christ, who gave his life so that everyone else might have life ... we need only apply that principle understanding of love to be faithful in living out that love.

In this way, we become other-focused, because God's love is other-focused. "God's love for "us" does not simply transform individuals and offer them the possibility of life, but it creates a community; indeed, ... God's love of "us" is for the community as a whole and not for its members separate from the community."<sup>vii</sup>

We must also engage in acts of love, for love is not emotional or theoretical; it is concrete. "As God's love is no abstraction but consists in the giving up of his Son, so the believer's love is not merely an emotion or attitude but consists of meaningful deeds."<sup>viii</sup>

And by reframing our understanding of love, we must rethink the way we interact with one another. God's love isn't an act that solely provides me eternal life, it's a cosmic act that makes it so all of humanity might have eternal life. "Salvation isn't just about managing our personal sins; it's also about restoring health and wellness to all of creation."<sup>ix</sup>

And this brings us back to the garden. If we, as God's created, because of an act of transgression in a garden eons ago, are undeserving of God's love ... if we, as God's created, because of a bite of fruit from the tree at the center of the garden by the first of created humanity, are incapable of being loved ... if we, as God's created, because of a serpent's lie in the first week of creation, are permanently marked as bad stock ... if we, as God's created, because of a desire to know right from wrong, and good from evil, are somehow absent the image of God ... then are we really capable of loving as God loves? Can we really participate in the formation of this community, which is built on and around the proclamation

of God's love in Jesus Christ? Can we really love one another, as the Epistle author defines, if we are so fully corrupted that we are incapable of being loved?

Such a belief, while filling many modern sermon, is not to be found in the Biblical text. The promise of our Holy Scripture is that we are God's beloved. The teaching of our foundational writings is that God is love, and that God's love is concrete, and that because of God's concrete witness of love, so too ought we love one another in the same way.

This is the joyful assurance of our faith. This is the salvific promise of our Church. This is the invitational hope, which we are called to proclaim. Receive this good news – you are God's beloved, redeemed by the one who is the witness of love. Claim your place at the table, and go forth to make that love known so that all of God's created might know such life-changing love. Amen.

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

<sup>ii</sup> Held Evans.

<sup>iii</sup> Held Evans.

<sup>iv</sup> Sherri Brown. "Commentary on 1 John 3:16-24." April 25, 2021. <http://workingpreacher.org>. Retrieved September 28, 2023.

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

<sup>vi</sup> Judith M. Lieu. *I, II, & III John: A Commentary (New Testament Library)*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008.

<sup>vii</sup> Lieu.

<sup>viii</sup> Smith.

<sup>ix</sup> Held Evans.