

GOD IS LOVE – Guest Pastor Augie Ristow (June 2, 2019)

1 John 4:7-12

If I were to ask you, “Who is God?” what would you say? Some of us might go back to our confirmation days and pull out the three “omnis.” Omnipotent, that is all powerful. Omniscient, He knows all. Omnipresent, that is He is present everywhere at the same time. That is true, but doesn't this only explain what God is and not who He is?

Others might remember Bible passages which say that God is pure, holy, and without sin. Again, this explains the characteristics of God, but does not help us better understand the essence of who God is.

If you recall that God is Triune, you are on the right track. Triune, Trinity means that God is One being and Three persons. God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This truth of who God is is revealed to us from the Bible. It is a teaching that we believe in our heart and accept with our mind even though we can't understand how it can be. Every Sunday we declare our belief in this biblical teaching with the Apostles' or Nicene Creeds.

This morning, I wish to share what God says He is with the word of St. John:

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God has revealed who He is in the Scripture. First, He says that He is Triune. No more clearly than in Matthew 28:19 where Jesus says, “Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit...” He teaches us that He is One God, Three Persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Each Person has been intimately involved in our life. Our Father knit together our soul and body in our mother's womb. He has given us all that we need for all our lives. The Son took on human flesh and gave His life as a living sacrifice to pay the guilt of sin and reconcile us to our heavenly Father. The Holy Spirit brings life to our dead soul. We are given faith to believe, forgiveness to receive, and, in our new Christian life, hope to lift us up and away from the mess of this world, looking always for the eternal life to come. This is who God is.

The second biblical revelation of God's essence is from the story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well. Jesus said, “God is Spirit...” (John 4:24) God's essence is that of pure Spirit which implies absolute freedom, independence, and accountability to no one or nothing. We creatures, who are finite because our bodies are connected to our soul, can easily visualize that God is Spirit.

The third biblical revelation of who God is is hard to conceptualize. Our text says that, “God is love.” Dictionaries and Christian scholars define love as a feeling of as an intense feeling of affection, fondness, favor, and tenderness. So is God the feeling of intense affection that radiates from His being? Yes. He is love, but not like any love that we know. To show how unlike His love is from ours, He chose the Greek word Agape because it had a particular understanding attached to it. God used Agape over two hundred sixty times in the New Testament. It is used exclusively to describe who He is, why He sent His Son into this world, described our love and what happens to us when we are made alive in faith.

We Christians try to describe Agape love as unconditional in contrast to our love which is conditional by nature of the sin in us. Our love is often turned inward and away from God or our fellow human beings. Unconditional also wrongly implies that regardless of our intentional sin, it will be okay with God because His love is without condition. God, as we know is also a just judge whose patience can run out. Look at Pharaoh, or King Saul, or the Israelites.

The Scriptures give us a better understanding of Agape love. In Psalm 89:4, God says, "My faithful love will be with him..." And in Jeremiah 31:3, God says, "I have loved you with an everlasting love..." So God says that He is faithful and everlasting Agape love. The Holy Spirit puts it in our heart to accept that God is faithful and everlasting Love.

God show His Love with grace and mercy. Grace, we say is undeserved love. It is really favor. Mercy is compassion in the form of promises or things done. For example, God saw how (lost) Adam and Eve were ashamed about the sin in their bodies and couldn't do a thing about their sin. In grace and mercy, God clothed them to cover their nakedness and gave them a promise of the Savior to take away the punishment of sin.

Because God is love, He acted in grace and mercy to our world. At the fullness of time, God sent His only begotten Son to take on our flesh. Jesus broke down the barriers so that we could meet God so that He could be in us again and we in Him. "This is how God showed his Agape love among us: He sent His one and only Son into the world that we might live through Him. This is (God's) love: not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins." Every time the word Love is used here, it is that special word of God: Agape. This only restates what John wrote the chapter before, "This is how we know what Agape love is: Jesus Christ laid down His life for us."

God is Love. In that Love, He came into your life. Now He and His Love live in you.

We have often confessed, "I, a poor miserable sinner..." The misery of our sin makes us feel so terrible, feeling so unforgivable, so ashamed that we feel totally unworthy to even raise our hands to heaven. Misery because of the mess we have made of our lives. Misery because Satan scourges our conscience over our sins past until it is raw.

It comforts us to know that God is faithful and everlasting Love. He says, "I love you in spite of yourself, I love you anyway. I forgive you for My Son Jesus took away all your sins. I free you from Satan. I fell you with My Love. I give you the gift of everlasting life. Don't be in misery." And there in the moment of our misery and confession, we understand God. He is love, faithful and everlasting. We feel His Love in our hearts. For, as Paul says in Romans 5: he has poured His Agape Love into our hearts in order that we might not only feel His Love, but to live a life of His Love. His Love gave new birth to our love. Love is what we are. Not selfish and self-centered, or turned inward. Our love is like God's: faithful and everlasting, showing grace and mercy to those in our lives, and an open heart to God.

Jesus said to doubting Thomas, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe." We are blessed, because God lives in us, and His Love does as well. Let us feel His Love and everyday seek after it. Amen.