

Grace to you, and peace, from God the Creator, and from Jesus, who is the Christ.  
Amen.

We all know the phrase, even if we rarely read the Bible; even if, present company excluded, we rarely attend church. Even if we rarely think of ourselves as Christian, we all know the phrase: God is love.

God is love, a phrase that appears exclusively in First John Chapter 4, our second reading for today. Now, 1 John 4 is one of my absolute favorite passages in the Bible. I also enjoy reading the book of Numbers, which is a census that was taken in the eighth century of the Israelites, and I love chapters that focus on “who begat whom,” but when I’m not so interested in those kinds of details, I come back to 1 John 4, and the reason I do is because this passage provides us with an absolutely exquisite account, not simply of God’s superficial characteristics, but of God’s essence, God’s nature. God is love.

So, let’s start there. What, again, is the nature of God? Take a look at verse 8, and then 16, of your second reading. It says, “Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love.” And then again, in verse 16, it says, “So we have known and believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and those who abide (which is used six times in this reading, and eight times in the Gospel reading for today; it means to dwell, or to remain.) Those who abide (or dwell) in love, dwell in God and God dwells in them.”

Love, as we will hear in a moment, has a sacramental quality insofar as it helps us make God present in the world. Now, let me pause for a moment on this simple phrase, “God is love,” to make sure we all understand that, according to First John, God is not a being or person up there beyond the clouds, who loves us and watches over us.

God, that text says, is love. Which is to say, God is better understood as a verb, then as a noun. God is better understood as an activity or an event. Consider the name Yahweh. That is the name for God we find in the Hebrew Bible. As Rabbi Rami Shapiro explains – and of course, I have to be quoting rabbis; I’m your resident rabbi – Rabbi Rami Shapiro explains, “Yahweh isn’t a noun, but a verb. Yahweh is an activity, be-ing itself, rather than *a* being, or even a Supreme Being.”

Now just think about that for a moment. God is not some kind of being who exists out there. Rather, God is the rehearsal of love that is made manifest in the acts of love. The 20th century theologian Karl Barth expresses the same idea. For him the being of God is an event. Because God is an event, “Speaking of God is, he writes, “like trying to follow a bird in flight with your eye.” I love that. “The living God” he concludes, “is always on the move.”

Now equating God with love itself raises an important question. How do we describe such love? What are the similarities and differences between God’s love and the way

we typically love? Well, of course, because I'm not only your resident rabbi, but you're a Lutheran pastor, I have to quote Martin Luther. He says that human love is conditional, and that God's love is unconditional. There are no requirements. There are no actions one must perform. God's love is unconditional. God loves you, and there's nothing you can do about it.

Martin Luther writes, "The love of God does not find, but creates that which is pleasing to it." This is actually the insight that would change Western history forever. Luther recognized that in order to experience salvation, instead of trying to reach the perfect standards of God, we trust that through Christ, God *makes* us righteous. God *changes* us by loving us. So again, Luther writes "The love of God does not find but creates that which is pleasing to us." We even sing about this from Psalm 51. "Create in us a clean heart, O God and renew a right spirit within me."

"The love of man," Luther writes, by contrast, "comes into being through that which is pleasing to it." So I see someone attractive, I may be drawn to that person because of their features. That's conditional love. The love of human beings comes into being, Luther argues, through that which is pleasing to it. Whereas the love of God does not find, but creates that which is pleasing to it.

Janette Ok, a professor of New Testament at Fuller Seminary puts it this way. "Love is not God." That's really important. "Love is not God. But God is love. Meaning that believers are to understand God's love on God's terms, and according to God's character, not on their own." In this case, human experience, with respect to God, is untrustworthy.

Okay, so how do we define love on God's terms rather than ours? That's the next question. For an answer, I invite you to turn to verses 9- 10 in our second reading. 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 is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins."

Now I find that language problematic, "the atoning sacrifice for our sins." It suggests at worst that God is some kind of abusive parental figure, or a tyrant who requires the death of Christ to satiate his wrath toward human beings. But the way John uses it, and the way we see it in the Old Testament, is different. Instead of it satisfying God's need for placation, it makes us clean. It's an old way of thinking in the Hebrew tradition, going all the way back to Leviticus.

But as we were talking about: How is God's love defined? And the answer here is that God's is a self-sacrificial form of love. You'll hear me say until I'm done preaching forever, that we as Christians are called to be "men and women for others." That's a phrase that comes from Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Why are we called to be men and women for others? Because God is a God *for us* in Jesus Christ. We should be imitators of God in this regard, to quote a line from Ephesians 5.

So how do we define love on God's terms? Self-sacrificial love, a kind of love that is focused on the well-being of the other, rather than what simply pleases us; and really,

an expression of the Trinity. The Trinity is a relationship. It's where three centers of personal distinction live for each other. That's why the Christian tradition is the only religious tradition that can say "God is Love from the beginning." In the beginning, what you have is a rehearsal of love. Pure relationship.

God in Christ, in turn, teaches us the true nature of love. How? By giving Godself over completely to the principalities and powers of this world, only to defeat and overcome them through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The incarnation and the crucifixion, which are both examples of God's self-sacrificial love, show us what love means on God's terms, not ours.

We see the same thing elsewhere in the New Testament. In Romans 8 for example, Paul writes, "What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not withhold His own Son, but gave him up" – one of the most common phrases used in the New Testament, *paradidomi* in Greek, "gave him up," (we translate it as "betrayed" in the Words of Institution), but God "gave up God's Son for all of us." And then Paul asks, "Will he not with him also give us everything else?"

In Philippians 2, Paul cites an early hymn of the Christian tradition, which is introduced by the phrase, "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who – and the hymn begins here – "though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness."

So the self-emptying of God, the incarnation, is actually a sacrifice on the part of God. God, as it were, "lets God's son go" or releases God's son into temporality, only to take up God's Son in and through the death and resurrection of Christ.

Now. Next question: How do we know God's love is unconditional, as we've been describing it? Well for an answer, take a look at verses 10 and 19. Once again, the author writes, "In this is love, not that we loved, but that he loved us and sent his son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins." So again, through the incarnation and crucifixion of Christ, we know that God's love is unconditional, and self-sacrificial.

Go beyond that, that as we see in verse 19: "We love because he first loved us." We know that God's love is unconditional, because God initiates the relationship. That's why, when we have baptisms in the church of infants, we have a clear illustration of how *God's love comes first*. That's why the font is placed near the entrance of a church. It signifies that God loved us first, and that we, in response to such love, are called to love God and others. God initiates the relationship.

All right, some evangelical Christians might say, "That's not a baptism. That's a christening! Only teenagers and adults can be baptized. After all, that's who was baptized in the Old Testament." Wrong. Yes, it's true that that the first generation of believers were adults who are baptized, but as we see in the story of Lydia in Acts 16, we learned that "she and her household were baptized." It stands to reason that her household, as did many households of the ancient world, included children and

possibly infants. So the idea that infant baptism is foreign to scripture of the New Testament is, quite simply, wrong.

Okay, now that we've grasped the nature of God – (can you believe that?) – the nature of God as love, let me take a slight detour. (You ready for this?)

What are the three great proofs for the existence of God? (You weren't ready for this, were you? Uh-uh!) Well, in the Christian tradition, they are:

The **cosmological** proof. And I learned about the cosmological proof for the existence of God when I was in confirmation many years ago. I was a seventh grader and I remember asking an eighth grader, "If God created the world, who created God?" and the answer I received was "a Supreme Being."

So of course, that raises the question, well, who then created this Supreme Being? You have the problem here of what's called "infinite regression," a causal series that goes back forever. Following the philosopher Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas, in the Catholic tradition, maintained that there must be a beginning to this causal series, an "uncaused cause" as it were, such that God's being is not derived from anything else, including a Supreme Being that was before God, but rather that God's being is self-derived and introduces, in the process, the causal series.

That's the cosmological; that one's easy, right? In the beginning – there has to be a beginning, the argument is – and if there is a beginning, then God must be the uncaused cause of that beginning.

All right. The next one is **teleological**, the teleological argument. That's fun. So, the word *telos* here in Greek means "to aim at something," like to shoot an arrow at a target. And what this argument suggests is that "the world has a purpose." The world is going somewhere, and God's design is evident throughout the world, insofar as we see order rather than pure chaos.

Paul anticipates this in Romans 1, when he writes ever since the creation of the world, God's eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood through the things he has made.

So, we have God as "the first cause." And God, you might say, as "the intelligent designer." But there's still more – if you order now, you can learn about the **ontological** proof for the existence of God, which goes something like this: If God is a perfect being, and to exist is more perfect than *not* to exist, then God must exist. Get it?

Now, how many of you did that convince that God is real? "If God is truly a perfect being, God *must* exist, because existence is more perfect than non-existence?" Well, I have to confess, after 11+ years of teaching as a professor, that argument had not convinced a single student in any of my classes of its validity. But it's still fun, and it's really not a proof; it's an attempt, in this case, of the theologian Anselm to make sense of his faith, you might say to convince *himself*, using reason, not to convince others.

Now why do I bring up these three proofs, the cosmological, teleological and the ontological? The reason is, I think we have a **fourth proof**: a practical proof for the existence of God, based upon our second reading for today. Do you know what it is? How else might we prove the existence of God?

**Love.** Love. Love others. Take a look at verses 11-12.

“Beloved, since God loved us so much, we ought also to love one another. No one has ever seen God. If we love one another, however, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.”

In other words, when we live for others as God lives for us, we *prove*, you might say, through our actions, that God is real. This is how the invisible God makes Godself visible: in and through Christian love.

And it suggests here something quite radical: God exists *only* in relationship. God exists *only* in relationship. Otherwise, God is simply an abstraction, a rehearsal, you might say, rather than a performance.

Let me explain. For those of you who read *the Quill* this past month, you may recognize what I’m about to share.

“I get weary.” (I love it. Now that I’m quoting myself, that means I’ve reached a new milestone in preaching.) “I get weary of people,” I wrote, “who talk about God and point to the sky, as if God in Heaven resides somewhere up there beyond the clouds. 1 John offers a compelling alternative. “No one has ever seen God,” the author writes, or “no one knows God. But if we love one another, God lives in us and God’s love is perfected in us.”

If you wish to find God, in other words, seek God in your neighbor. In loving others, you *make* God exist. “You make God exist,” as the French philosopher Maurice Clavel once said; you incarnate God, who is Love.

So let’s put this all together:

- God is love.
- This love is inherently self-sacrificial, other-oriented or unconditional.
- The unconditional nature of God’s love is illustrated insofar as God loves us first.
- We love others *because* God loves us first.
- When we reflect such love in the way we treat and care for other people, *we make God exist*.
- Love for others becomes, therefore, the true evidence, the *proof* that we know God, and that God is real.

Isn’t that something? That’s something you can prove to people out in the world every day of the week; not by recourse to Anselm or Aquinas or Aristotle, but simply as evident in the way you treat others, because you know you are loved.

Okay, I noticed it's raining now – of course it's raining in Seattle, the sun goes away – How then do we live this out? Well, one commentator has an answer. He writes, "True Christians imitate the love that God has shown us in sending the Son to give life to the world." Again, true Christians imitate the love that God has shown us. "Such love," the commentator adds, "should motivate us to love others."

But I think the message here in 1 John is way more radical. It's not simply that we should *imitate* God's love or become "little Christs," a phrase wrongly attributed to Martin Luther; it's not simply that we should merely imitate God's love, and as progressive Protestants, do what we can to follow the Way.

Instead, when we care and love for others, we *incarnate* God. Listen closely. We *become* Christ to our neighbor. Again, not "little Christs" who imitate the example of Jesus, but *the sacramental Christ*, the Christ we make *truly present* in our care and concern for other people.

This means we bear a tremendous responsibility. (And that's just what you need from church on Sunday, right? Another responsibility in your lives.) But here it is: Our task is to show the world that God exists *through our actions*, and I can't think of a better day to demonstrate that than the Blessing of the Quilts. This is *our* proof that God is real, when we care for others without conditions. It's not, therefore, through clever arguments or even appeals to Scripture that we can prove God's existence, but rather through the way we live our lives and the way we treat others.

We all know the phrase "God is Love." But now, with the Spirit's help, we know a little more about what it means. God is not a being who loves us from somewhere up there beyond the clouds. God *is* Love. And the only way to make that love real is to live it.

In Jesus's name,  
Amen.