

I Love You, Too
Sermon XChange – February 14, 2010
Pastor Nancy Kraft at Unity of Charlotte

It doesn't happen very often that Valentine's Day falls on a Sunday. But this is one of those years, so here we are worshipping together on a day that that world around us proclaims is all about love. It's a great time for God's people to explore what we really mean when we use the word *love* and what that might have to do with our relationship with God.

I don't know about you, but I find that my human relationships often can teach me a lot about my relationship with God. Sometimes because my human relationships are so similar to my relationship with God. And sometimes because my human relationships are so different from my relationship with God.

Now, one of the things that I've learned from my human relationships is that if I love someone, I need to tell them. Love is not meant to be a secret. If I love someone I can't keep it to myself. For example, whenever I talk on the telephone with either my daughter or my son, we always end our conversation with one of us saying "I love you" and then the other one will come back with "I love you, too." It seems very natural for me to do that with my kids.

But as a divorced woman who dates men, I've learned that when I'm in a romantic relationship with a man, it's not so easy because the words "I love you" come with all kinds of baggage. Not too long ago, there was a man in my life who I dated for a couple of years and I grew to love him. It wasn't something I could keep to myself, so I told him. "I love you," I said. And he said to me... "Thank you." Ouch! Thank you? That's not what you're supposed to say when someone says "I love you." But he couldn't bring himself to say "I love you, too" so he said "thank you."

I made me think of my relationship with God. God tells me "I love you" again and again in my life and usually the best I can do is say "thank you", when the response God really wants from me is "I love you, too."

Hear how this is described in John's first letter. (4:7-21)

⁷Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. ⁸Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. ⁹God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. ¹⁰In 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. ¹¹Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. ¹²No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us. ¹³By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit.

¹⁴And we have seen and do testify that the Father has sent his Son as the Savior of the world. ¹⁵God abides in those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God, and they abide in God. ¹⁶So we have known and believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.

¹⁷Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness on the day of judgment, because as he is, so are we in this world. ¹⁸There 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. ¹⁹We love because he first loved us.

²⁰Those 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. ²¹The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.”

Anyone who has ever started at Genesis and tried to read the Bible all the way through will tell you that it's not easy. And it can be very confusing if you're trying to figure out the nature of God. In some places God is loving and nurturing, providing for all of his people's needs and in other places he's so angry that he wipes out entire cities with the snap of his fingers. In some places he's a rock that can't be moved and in other places a conversation with a mortal can change his mind. In some places he's insisting that people must follow his laws if they want to live and in other places he's merciful and ready to give people another chance when they stray.

You see, what we have in the Bible is the story of a relationship. It's about the relationship between God and his people. And it's told from the perspective of the people, with the only thing they have to go on being their own limited experience. From their experience they do the best they can to figure out who God is. We do the same thing. We all try to make sense of God according to what's going on in our lives. But we have added information about God that people in Old Testament times didn't have. We don't have to wonder about what God is like. In John's gospel he explained it this way: “No one has ever seen God. It is God, the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.” If we want to know what God is like, all we have to do is look at Jesus.

In his first epistle, John is able to elaborate more on what he means by this. Lest we miss his point, he cuts to the chase and spells it out in three simple words: *God is love*. Of all the ways we can describe the nature of God, this is the most fundamental. God is love. It's not just a theory; it's a fact. How do we know? We know by looking at Jesus. Because in Jesus, God revealed himself to us. And what do we learn about the nature of God from Jesus? Jesus embodied compassion by his actions and his teachings. He healed the sick and touched the untouchables. He embraced those others turned away. He spoke on behalf of those who had no voice. He taught us to serve one another in humility and even to love our enemies. He stood up to those who put following the rules above mercy and compassion. His entire life was given in love, and it didn't end there. In death he gave himself in love as well. He went to a cross because he could only be who he was. He stretched out his arms in love for the world and they nailed his hands to a wooden cross. Let there be no doubt about what God is all about. Look at Jesus and you know. God is love.

Now, that's not just a nice thought that you could put on a greeting card. It changes everything for us. John writes: “Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another.” Our lives are given in response to God's love given for us. A lot of times we miss this. We may live in the way we think God wants us to live out of fear. In Lutheran theology we call this living by the law. Or we may live in response to God's unconditional love offered to us. We call that living by grace.

When I was a teenager having a physical done so that I could go to college, I was in the restroom filling a specimen cup and I overheard my mother, on the other side of the door, talking to my family doctor. “Should I run a pregnancy test?” he asked her. And I will never forget the words my mother spoke. She said, “No that won't be necessary.” “Are you sure?” the doctor asked her. “I am as sure as any mother can be,” she answered. Wow! “I am as sure as any mother can be.” I was overwhelmed with the love and trust that had gone into that statement. And I made up my mind right then and there that I would never do anything to hurt or disappoint my mother in any way. It was a silent promise I made to my mother. It was offered in love, in response to the love she had first shown me.

How different that is from the young woman who lives in fear of a parent who lays down the law saying, "If you ever get yourself in trouble you will not be welcome in this house." The result might also be a life on the "straight and narrow", but it is motivated by fear and not by love.

As God's beloved children, he expects us to love one another. Not because he will stop loving us if we don't do what he tells us to do, but precisely because he will never stop loving us no matter what we do.

That's why John can make the bold assertion: "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. We love because God first loved us."

I meet a lot of people who are searching for their purpose in life. "Why doesn't God just tell me what he wants me to do?" they'll ask. It's an interesting question. And it reminds me of another incident with my mom while I was growing up.

When I was a kid and my mom's birthday was coming up, I would go to her and ask, "What do you want for your birthday, Mom?" And her answer was always the same. "Nancy, if you want to give me something, clean your room." Well, that was the last thing I wanted to give my mother for her birthday and at the time I thought she was just being uncooperative. So I would go out and buy her something that I thought she might like.

But you know, once I became a mother with kids who kept their rooms a lot like I did when I young, I understood what my mom was saying. And I realized that she meant it. The best present I could have given her would have been cleaning my room.

When we're struggling to discern God's will for our lives, we long to have a clear answer to the question, "What do you want from me, God?" But I've come to the conclusion that often we aren't any more interested in hearing what God really wants from us than I was interested in hearing what mom really wanted from me. After all, it's not such a great mystery what God's will is for our lives and discerning it is not like the search for the Holy Grail.

Do you remember when Jesus was quizzed by a Jewish expert in the law who wanted Jesus to cut to the chase and tell him what the most important law was? Jesus couldn't answer the question because he couldn't identify the one most important law. He had to give two. "'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'"(Matthew 22:37-39)

For Jesus, these aren't two separate laws to live by. They are two parts of the same law. The way to love God is by loving your neighbor. It's not just a matter of saying "I love you, God" over and over again. It's about showing our love for God in the way we treat other people.

This sounds so easy, doesn't it? And yet, as Christians, our failure to love because God first loved us has caused untold problems throughout history. In the name of God, we Christians have fought countless wars, we have burned people at the stake, we have closed our ears to the cries of the poor and the hungry, we have locked our doors and our hearts to people we deem unworthy of our community, we have hung human beings from trees because we don't like the color of their skin, we have prospered materially from the desperation of people we don't even know. We do all these things and

more, in the name of God. And God is love? Why don't we get it? If John had said, "God is hate", our actions would make more sense. But God isn't hate. God is love.

"We love because God first loved us. Those who say 'I love God,' and hate their brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also." Why is this so difficult for us? How is it possible for us to know and experience the love of God in our lives and withhold that same love from others? Maybe the key for us is opening ourselves up to receive the love that God offers us. So often we're closed off and God's love doesn't stand a chance.

It's like putting a lid on a cup and expecting someone to pour water into it. When we open ourselves up to God's love, it's like removing the lid and filling our cup... underneath a waterfall! That's how the writer Annie Dillard says God's grace comes to us. She says that we catch grace like a man filling a cup under a waterfall.

Imagine what that would be like. Our cup is filled and spilling out all over the place. We can't possibly contain it all. That's what happens when we're open to God's love filling our lives. He fills us to overflowing and his love spills out on everyone around us.

I have enjoyed being with you this morning. The ways we worship are very different. I'm sure Rev. Ennis will be able to attest to that, too. And there are ways that our churches differ theologically. But none of that really matters in the grand scheme of things. For the life of faith isn't about the ways we worship or getting our theology right. It's about the relationship with God. It's about growing in that relationship so that God's love flows through us. That's what it means to become the people God created us to be. People created in God's image.

As God's people who meet in different places on Sunday mornings, we can encourage one another along the way as we grow in that relationship. For a relationship with God isn't just between God and me. And it isn't just between God and the people in my church. The relationship I have with God is also between us. It's something that connects us as God's people.

Our God says to us, "I love you." Through Jesus Christ we know those are more than just words alone. "I love you," he says. Our lives are given in response to God's love. Not just with the words alone, but with lives that say "I love you too."