

“The Oldest Cliché in the Book”

1 John 4:7-21; Acts 8:26-40

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5th Sunday in Easter

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Love, love, love – 29 times in the space of 15 verses! There it is: some form of “agape” – love. Too much talk of love is irritating to me. It could be the politics of the time. You hear the President promise that we’re going to have a “bill of love” to protect the so-called Dreamers and it make you want to throw up because you know it’s all talk. Or maybe this cynicism is specific to the pastorate. People sometimes think pastors should be enraptured with love and kindness and other ethereal things because we somehow have a front row seat to the mystery of God’s love. Well, sure. But we also have a front row seat to the human condition. Parents who regress to adolescence in their mid 40s, children trapped on those escalators to success that we all fight to stay on even though we can’t see where it’s going, the terrible things that we do to the people that we “love.” Or maybe after 17 years of marriage myself, when I do pre-marital counseling, I’m apt to skip over the romantic “how did you meet” conversation and get right to the good stuff. Tell me about your last good fight, or the stuff that’s hard to talk about in your sex life, or why your finances are a mess. Tell me how you’re running from your parents or how you’re becoming them so we can put aside our flowery facades and get to real life. Too much talk of love is irritating to me.

But my irritation is also irritating to me. Cynicism and skepticism aren’t strategies that lead to anything. They’re defense mechanisms. They protect us from getting hurt but they don’t lead anywhere except loneliness.

“I’m consciously shedding the assumption that a skeptical point of view is the most intellectually credible,” Krista Tippett wrote. “Intellect does not function in opposition to mystery; tolerance is not more pragmatic than love; and cynicism is not more reasonable than hope. Unlike almost every worthwhile thing in life, cynicism is easy. It’s never proven wrong by the corruption or the catastrophe. It’s not generative. It judges things as they are, but does not lift a finger to try to shift them.”¹

Actually cynicism and skepticism haven’t always been that easy or that negative. The cynics of ancient Greece were a lot different than the cynics of today. Cynic meant dog-like. The original cynics tried to live life in the same way a dog does. Forget about wrestling against a universe you can’t control. Just “go with the flow” and not worry so much. Live outside – like a dog -and then you don't have to defend a house! Use the bathroom in the same way dogs go to the bathroom. Go with the flow! Don't be ashamed of yourself and don't try to accomplish anything. “When we think of cynicism today,” historian Jennifer Michael Hecht says, “we tend

¹ Krista Tippett, *Becoming Wise: An Inquiry into the Mystery and Art of Living*, (New York: Penguin Books), 2017, p. 236.

to think of people dismissing even those things dogs love.² Cynicism hasn't always been so negative. We've made it that way.

We've done the same thing with skepticism. Skepticism started with Socrates saying, the universe isn't really setup to cater to our need for knowledge. The natural world is setup to be "alive, to reproduce. We shouldn't expect to much from it." So Socrates says, I know more than anyone else because I know I don't know anything. Then later skepticism develops into an awareness that there are so many brilliant, amazing competing philosophies that can't all be right so how should I think about all of this wonderful amazing knowledge? What's the right strategy for discernment?"³

We've turned skepticism into a mode of rejection of anything we can't yet explain instead of one of appreciation and embrace of wonder and mystery about the world we don't fully know. We've turned cynicism from a "go with the flow" way of life to a dour rejection of even the things that dogs love. These things haven't always been so negative – we made them that way.

So it's no wonder that the church is in danger of doing the same thing with love. Many of us have been burned in the church in some form or fashion. Somebody said something harmful or hurtful. We got excluded or not invited to something. The church leadership or its people went a direction we didn't like. We got overworked or overlooked. Or maybe something more nefarious. A pastor violated a sacred covenant through his or her, but mostly his behavior. A couple was excluded because of their love for each other. People charged with the protection of children neglected their responsibility because they didn't want to offend.

The church in the public arena has only added to our cynical suspicions of Christian love. Michael Gerson, an evangelical writing in the April issue of *The Atlantic Monthly* marvels at how "so many evangelicals lost their interest in decency, and how a religious tradition called by grace became defined by resentment."⁴ While he does not believe that most evangelicals are racist, "every strong Trump supporter has decided that racism is not a moral disqualification in the president of the United States. And that is something more than a political compromise. It is a revelation of moral priorities."⁵ It's no wonder that we have a hard time imagining that the church can be a place where love is lived. It's no wonder that we're skeptical when we even hear the word.

The epistle of John seems to know this. It seems to know that before the word love can lead to anything good, it needs a definition . A definition that makes it more difficult to be redefined by racists, or abusers, or any one of us when we twist it to serve our purposes. You want to talk about love, the book asks? Look at God sending Jesus into our world to announce God's reign, agitating us away from our idolatry, suffering on our systems of oppression, and still not giving up on our

² Jennifer Michael Hecht interview with Krista Tippett, *On Being*, January 8, 2009, <https://onbeing.org/programs/jennifer-michael-hecht-history-doubt-3/>

³ Ibid.

⁴ "How Evangelicals Lost Their Way," *The Atlantic Monthly*, April, 2018, p. 52.

⁵ Ibid, 51.

futures. Jesus' life, ministry, death, and resurrection is our grounding point for love. Love is not a feeling – it's the movement of God toward us in flesh and blood and history. A commitment to us that comes with costs for God and for us. A specific commitment that offers extraordinary grace, but also comes with significant demands.

John starts with a definition, but the veracity of that definition is proven by the fruits that love produces. "Those who say, "I love God," and hate their brothers or sisters," John says, "are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen."

Mark Achtemeier, a conservative evangelical, Presbyterian seminary Professor switched his positions on LGBT people, ordination, and marriage in the middle of the intensive debates that took place in the Presbyterian Church over a decade ago. The thing that initiated Dr. Achtemeier's transformation was his awareness of the effects traditional teaching was having on the lives of gay people.

He recalled an encounter with an older man who had struggled with same-sex attraction. His evangelical friends had prayed with him and for him. They supported him through an intensive program of spiritual counseling and rehabilitative therapy. They walked alongside him as supportive friends and colleagues. But none of this "worked" and he lost his career and his family. "He couldn't understand," Achtemeier said, "why the God he loved would abandon him this way."

"I kept encountering devout gay Christians who struggled with all their might to follow traditional church teaching," he said. "Some succeeded at it. They were doing all the things my conservative colleagues and I believed they should do. And the result of this heroic faithfulness was broken and despairing people. I saw deep depression, shattered families, bitter alienation from God. One of these friends [died by] suicide."

"I knew my Bible well enough to know that these outcomes were the exact opposite of what the Bible tells us to expect from faithful discipleship. . . I was at a loss to explain this stark contradiction between the Bible's description of the fruits of faithfulness, and fruits I was actually seeing."⁶ And so began Mark Achtemeier's fearless testing of the word love that we so casually throw around. Fearlessness which 1 John says is the first fruit of real love.

It's that fearlessness that we need in the church. Not a utopia, but fearlessness. We know our tendencies to excuse injustice or deny our hand in contributing to it. We know our tendencies to run from conflict or to add to it selfishly and unnecessarily. We know our tendencies to sentimentalize love or to cynically cheapen its possibilities. Attempts to live a flawless love end in cynicism and cynicism is easy. No, we need fearlessness not flawlessness in the church. And our best chance to find it is together in community.

Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch might seem like an odd place to find that kind of community, but William Brosend points out that the Ethiopian doesn't ask for a teacher, he asks for a guide. "Teachers point and say, 'go there, do that,'"

⁶ Mark Achtemeier, "You Will Know Them By Their Fruits," address to The Covenant Network of Presbyterians, Detroit, MI, June 16, 2014.

Brosend writes. "Guides reach out and say, "This is the road I traveled. You might want to try it, but whatever road you choose, I'd like to walk it with you." Both Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch go down into the water for Philip's baptism, Brosend notes. "Teachers say, 'I told you so.' Guides come after you if you lose your way. The church. . .needs fewer teachers and more guides."⁷ I agree with Brosend though I'd argue that the best teachers are actually guides. Guides who show others love instead of trying to tell them about it.

I wonder who has guided you along your journey to a greater understanding of God's love leading to a greater discipline of loving your neighbor? How did they define love for you beyond the clichés? And I wonder about the times when you've found yourself guiding others searching for direction along the winding paths of life. What made it possible for you to act more like a guide and less like a teacher? And I wonder what it would mean for our own congregation if we judged the depth of our love for God and neighbor by the fruits of our fearlessness instead of our failure to be flawless?

⁷ William Brosend, "Unless Someone Guides Me," *The Christian Century*, May 10, 2000, 535.