

Feb 14 Family Love Luke 14:25-26; 1 John 4:7-12

I have some names I'd like to add to our prayer list—some of our men forgot that today was Valentine's Day. This note says they will soon be transferred from intensive care to regular rooms in their garages.

Valentine's Day, other than being a huge commercial enterprise, is a celebration of love; especially romantic love. As I looked through Valentine's cards late last night, I came on this expression of love...

*Real love is a permanently **self-enlarging** experience.* I think you were supposed to buy a big box of chocolates to go with that other self-enlarging experience. There must be lots of love in our world, I thought. I could not find one card that said, I'm so glad we split or where's your love been lately. They were all very sweet, like three packs of sugar in your coffee.

But when I went looking for Valentine's Day songs, I thought, there must not be much love in the world because everyone is begging for more of it. Back in the 40s, Frank Sinatra was dying for five minutes more. *Here am I, begging for only five minutes more; Only five minutes more of your charms; All week long I dreamed about our Saturday date; Don't you know that Sunday morning you can sleep late.* (toss card with lyrics aside)

It got worse in the 50s with poor Elvis singing **Mean Woman Blues** at the **Heartbreak Hotel**. No wonder Johnny Cash wore black. He was depressed: *Everybody's going out and having fun; I'm a fool for staying home and having none. I can't get over how she set me free. Oh, lonesome me.*

There was a love drought in the 60s too: *Yesterday, All my troubles seemed so far away, Now it looks as though they're here to stay, Oh, I believe in yesterday. Why she had to go I don't know, she wouldn't say. I said, Something wrong, now I long for yesterday.*

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And it got worse in the 90's...I had trouble finding lyrics I could read to a PG audience.

By the time the 21st century arrived, even sweet country girls like Carrie Underwood started digging their keys into the side of their boyfriend's truck, carving their initials in his leather seats, taking a baseball bat to his headlights and slashing his tires. I guess that happened before **Jesus took the wheel**.

If this is the state of love in our world, how is authentic divine love even possible? What would faithful family love look like in our world?

We begin by confronting the most difficult family passage in the NT. In **Luke 24** Jesus said we must **hate** our family members in order to be his disciples. The Greek *misōso* means hate, nothing less. It's the strongest word that could be used.

Most scholars believe Jesus was using hyperbole like pastors talking about their experience in front of a search committee. I don't think hyperbole is the best answer. I think Jesus was using shock speech. When you need to move solid stone, only dynamite will do. In this case, the stone was the family tradition of that Jewish culture. Hank Williams Jr. sang about being stuck in it and that's what Jesus faced.

Do you remember this exchange around the question of following Jesus? It's from Luke 9: 57*As they were walking along the road, a man said to him, "I will follow you wherever you go." Jesus replied, "Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head."* This is an expression that means I don't have a home or family. *He said to another man, "Follow me." But the man replied, "Lord, first let me go and bury my father."* Jesus said to him, *"Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and proclaim the kingdom of*

God." Still another said, "I will follow you, Lord; but first let me go back and say good-bye to my family." Jesus replied, "No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God."

In all three cases the barrier to following Jesus was the stone wall around the family. In Jesus day, only persons who *hated their family* would break the family mold. But Jesus knew there was a better way to live and love.

But I want to focus on our text from 1 John 4, especially one phrase in that text on love. Listen again beginning in v. **9. *This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.***

What is striking about this text is the context of love. Gods love is made manifest AMONG us, not to each of us. God's love is made complete in us, not in me. When Jesus promised to be among us **where ever two or three were gathered in his name**, he described the same dynamic. God's love is made known among humans in relationship

When Jesus was teaching in his hometown, Scripture says he was able to do no miracles among the people. The problem wasn't that Jesus lost his touch or that people can derail the power of God. Rather, there was something in the midst of them; a stifling power.

Social scientists have come to understand that healthy families are not the product of each member's love, but another and stronger force at work AMONG them. That power can wreak havoc on a family system or it can create a love that is greater than the sum of its parts. Family love is more that the love each family member brings to the system.

There is a power among us, for good or ill, and it is beyond each of us and is more powerful than any of us. Who has not wondered why good people can go to Washington and somehow become part of the problem instead of the solution? The system is more powerful than any member of the system.

Put the greatest teacher in the world in a school of toxic relationships and just like Jesus, they won't be able to work their miracles. Even good loving people are no match for unhealthy relational systems. The power among us is stronger than the power in each of us.

Quantum physicists and cosmologists have discovered the same thing in their study of the universe. There is a power at work in our universe that is stronger than the energy of stars and galaxies. It's there, but they can't see it. They call it **dark matter and dark energy**.

Dark matter is just what its name implies; it is matter (or mass) in the universe that we cannot see, measure or analyze. Dark matter does not reveal its presence by emitting any type of **electromagnetic radiation**. It emits no **infrared radiation** or **ultraviolet radiation**. Dark matter does not give off radio waves, X-rays or gamma rays. It is truly "dark." Cosmologists have theorized that we can see only about 10 percent of the matter in the universe. The rest is dark matter and dark energy. (Scientific American)

The only way Scientists can even theorize about dark energy and matter is by observing anomalies in the rotation and clustering of galaxies. Some extremely powerful force is accelerating the expansion of the universe and bending galaxies. Scientists can't see it. They see only the effects.

Unseen power is the nature of the universe and of the Creator of the universe. In Romans 1 Paul says the power of God is evident by what God created. We don't see God's power per se,

but we can see what God's power does. Jesus said to the religious leaders, even *if you don't believe in me, believe the miracles I do*; the visible evidence of God with us.

So now we come back to the nature of family love. Jesus said: *A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another.*³⁵ *By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.* Quite simply, Jesus is telling us that we are the anomalies in life; the effectis that show God's power at work.

Family love is not simply the love you have for each person in your family or the love they feel for you. Family love is the power and presence of God at work in your family, influencing the way you treat your brother; the way you speak to your sister; the way you interact with your spouse. No one can measure this love or even see it. But we can see its impact on relationships. We see how it transforms our lives.

There is that famous encounter between a **Baptist evangelist and an Amish man**. The Baptist asked the Amish man if he was a Christian, looking for an answer about his personal belief in Jesus. The Amish man gave no such testimony. Instead, he wrote something on a piece of paper and handed it to the Baptist. *Here are the names of 7 people who know me. Go ask them if I'm a Christian.* God's love leaves a trail; divine love changes the course of earthly bodies.

By this, all people will know that you are my disciples; if you love one another. In my faith tradition, this meant looking like you had the perfect Christian family. You dressed up and put on your best smile as you emerged from car after a family fight.

When I was growing up, my dad and my brother were at each other constantly. They fought, yelled, hit. Mom was in the middle and I tried to stay out. This was the dominant power in our family system until my brother left home. I can't tell you the number of ways this relational soap opera shaped my life.

Some of you could tell stories of growing up in the family of an alcoholic and what kind of power that had in your family system.

Others could tell stories of always living on the edge of sustenance, wondering if there would be enough to make the house payment or pay the utilities. The anxiety is palpable and powerful as it descends on a family like a fog.

Many of you know what it's like to be in a family where mom and dad fight or where there is abuse. There is an invisible power of pain in such families. It can choke the living and the loving out of family relationships.

I have seen too many families that look good on the outside launch into a vicious cat fight over an estate. That anger and alienation was there long before mommy and daddy died.

And some of you have been in toxic churches. How do some churches survive the chronic conflict and power plays that take place among them? Instead of seeing how bad these relational systems are, let's turn the thing around and ask, how is it possible for anything good and true to emerge from such dysfunction? My answer is the power of God's love among us.

Think about it. **Give where we've been, it's a miracle we have the capacity to love and nurture at all.** This is what I think Jesus meant about our witness of loving others. If not for a power beyond us and among us, we would sink deeper and deeper into the abyss.

Good News: the power of God's love among us, beyond our awareness, is healing brokenness; binding wounds and giving light to our eyes. The foundation of family love is not the love we produce, but in the power of God's love at work among us doing *more than we can ask or imagine*.

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