

“Where Love Abides”  
I John 4:7-12, 18-21  
May 14, 2006

Rev. Christine Chakoian  
First Presbyterian Church  
Lake Forest, Illinois

*Love is from God.* In the Bible, love – *agape* -- is not a natural phenomenon. One theologian (Rudolf Bultmann) suggests that love is not “a universal human possibility” (*The Johannine Epistles*, cited by Black 430). Another (Raymond Brown) says: “*Agape* is not a love originating in the human heart and reaching out [nobly] ...; it is a spontaneous, unmerited, creative love flowing from God to the Christian, and from the Christian to [another]” (*The Epistles of John* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1982), 254-5). Yet another (Clifton Black) adds that there’s an enormous “difference between *agape* and romantic love, friendship, political concourse, and altruism – the valuable, but relatively small, coin of our realm. ... Love is not one thing among many that God does; *everything* that God does is loving, for God as revealed in Christ is nothing other than love” (433). I’ll stop there; you get the point. Love – *agape* -- is not a natural phenomenon. Love is from God.

What is so astonishing to me, then, is *how* this love shows up in our lives: Scripture tells us, *If we love one another, God abides in us*. Or, as someone has said: “*We are the sphere in which God’s love is exhibited*” (Brown, 516). In other words, our very lives are the houses in which God’s love lives – the windows through which the world sees God’s love. That’s quite a proposition, and no little responsibility. The question I want to explore today is this: how do we *best* love one another so that the world can see God’s love?

A few centuries ago, Frederick Spanheim, a German theologian, wrote: “They are the true disciples of Christ, not who know most, but who love most” (citation unknown). And love is sorely needed. Mother Teresa was best known for her work in India with the poor. But in her collection of teachings, *The Simple Path*, she diagnoses the profound need for love in the wealthiest lands:

“The greatest disease in the West today is not TB or leprosy; it is being unwanted, unloved, and uncared for. We can cure physical diseases with medicine, but the only cure for loneliness, despair and hopelessness is love.

There are many in the world who are dying for a piece of bread, but there are many more dying for a little love. The poverty in the West is a different kind of poverty – it is not only a poverty of loneliness, but also of spirituality. There’s a hunger for love, as there is a hunger for God. ...

“We have all been created for greater things – to love and be loved. ... works of love are always a means of becoming closer to God, so the more we help each other, the more we really love God better by loving each other. Jesus very clearly said, ‘Love one another as I have loved you.’ Love in action is what gives us grace. ... There is something else to remember – that this kind of love begins at home” (NY: Ballantine, 1995), p. 79).

This kind of love indeed begins at home. And yet it is in our daily encounters that love can be most stretched. It is nothing we intend to do, but in our tiredness or stress, or simply out of habit, we find love slipping like sand through our fingers. We belittle a loved one. We snap at our children. We ignore our parents. We gossip about a co-worker or classmate. We tune out the news of those who are suffering, close by or in the city, or in some torn-up country halfway round the world. We disdain those who disagree with us, in matters of politics or even the church. We close up our hearts. And we find ourselves oddly out of touch with God. It is no wonder. God cannot abide where there is no room for love.

So how do we make room for love ... how do we make room for God? I think we are genuinely hungry to know how, or the bookstore shelves would not be lined with self-help advice, and Dr. Phil would go out of business. But I don’t think love has to be that complicated. So here’s my take on it.

First, hush up and listen. And second, speak the truth in love.

Let me say just a little more about each one.

First, hush up and listen: listening is a lost art – and it is an art. Listening does not come naturally, but is a learned skill, which, by the way, we need very deliberately to teach our children. Effective listening requires time and attention. Occasionally it requires special time – “let’s sit down and talk about this” – but more often it occurs in our everyday activities: driving your child to school or

soccer practice; checking in over supper; saying goodnight. What it *always* requires is genuine interest ... not just in the “what” but in the “why” – the feelings underneath.

This can be tricky stuff, but again, it’s learnable. An aspect of emotional intelligence is to hone in on the *reason* someone wants what they do. For example, in pre-marital counseling, when I have couples face each other and say something they’d like their partner to do differently or more of, that’s the easy piece. When the bride says to the groom, “I’d like you to make the phone calls you promised to make,” the harder part is to get – to *really* get – why it matters. What she’s really saying is, “I’m afraid you’re not reliable, and if you’re not reliable in this, how can I trust you with the rest of my life?” It may or may not be fair or rational ... and it may or may not result in changed behavior on the groom’s part. But it does do this: every time he really pays attention to the feelings underneath the words, she knows that he really loves her. And if it really matters that much to her, chances are he’ll honor her by changing his ways.

So first, listen. But second, speak ... as Scripture says, “speak the truth in love.” At our church officers’ training yesterday, one of the Bible passages we read was where Jesus says, “if someone offends you, go and talk to that person. If he or she doesn’t listen, then bring in one or two others.” And we had to acknowledge that more often than not, when someone offends us, the last thing we do is tell them directly. Most of the time, we whine to someone else: “Can you believe what so-and-so said this time?” or something along those lines. Now, it may let us blow off steam, but do we think it’s going to fix the relationship? Do we believe that somehow the offender is going to know their transgression by osmosis? I know this is radical stuff, but what if – what if we actually spoke to the person – the family member, the friend, the co-worker – directly. Kindly, respectfully, but directly. Using “I” language, not “you” language. Something like, “This is hard for me to say, and it may be harder for you to hear, but I want you to know that I felt offended/angry/hurt when you told that joke/slammed our colleague/dissed your grandmother.” It may or may not produce a better relationship, but talking behind someone’s back never does. And I know it’s not easy to talk to someone so directly, but no one said the Christian walk was easy. It is hard work, but it’s worth it. Because it makes room for God’s love.

On this Mother's Day, I want to celebrate the power of love – of God's love – when it takes root and abides, when ordinary lives of love become the window through which the world can see something of God's extraordinary grace. And it makes me think of something Martin Luther King Jr. once said about one modest woman who handed this love to him when he was exceedingly low. Who did this simply by listening, really listening, and by speaking the truth in love:

“One of the most dedicated participants in the bus protest in Montgomery, Alabama, was an elderly Negro whom we affectionately called Mother Pollard. Although poverty-stricken and uneducated, she was amazingly intelligent and possessed a deep understanding of the meaning of the movement. After having walked for several weeks, she was asked if she were tired. With ungrammatical profundity, she answered, ‘My feets is tired, but my soul is rested.’

“On a particular Monday evening, following a tension-packed week which included being arrested and receiving numerous threatening telephone calls, I spoke at a mass meeting. I attempted to convey an overt impression of strength and courage, although I was inwardly depressed and fear-stricken. At the end of the meeting, Mother Pollard came to the front of the church and said, ‘Come here, son.’ I immediately went to her and hugged her affectionately. ‘Something is wrong with you,’ she said. ‘You didn’t talk strong tonight.’ Seeking further to disguise my fears, I retorted, ‘Oh, no, Mother Pollard, nothing is wrong. I am feeling as fine as ever.’ But her insight was discerning. ‘Now you can’t fool me,’ she said. ‘I knows something is wrong. is it that we ain’t doing things to please you? Or is it that the white folks is bothering you?’ Before I could respond, she looked directly into my eyes and said, ‘I don told you we is with you all the way.’ Then her face became radiant and she said in words of quiet certainty, ‘But even if we ain’t with you, God’s gonna take care of you.’

Since that dreary night in 1956, Mother Pollard has passed on to glory and I have known very few quiet days. I have been tortured without and tormented within by the raging fires of tribulation. I have been forced to withstand howling winds of pain and jostling storms of adversity. But as the years have unfolded the eloquently simple words of Mother Pollard have come back again and again to give light and peace and guidance to my troubled soul. ‘God’s

gonna take care of you” (“Antidotes to Fear,” *Strength to Love* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1963), 125-6).

Where God abides, love takes up its home in us. Strong love. Encouraging love. Perfect love, the kind that casts out fear.

“Love in action is what gives us grace,” Mother Teresa said. “And this kind of love begins at home”: this kind of love: that listens deeply, and speaks truthfully, until our very lives become the houses in which God’s love abides ... the windows through which the world will see God’s love. Amen.