

“God’s Got the Whole World...”
Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia
Season of Epiphany, Sunday, February 12, 2017
James L. Brewer-Calvert, Senior Pastor

Holy Scriptures: 1 John 4: 1-6; Matthew 5: 21-37; Revelation 21: 1-2, 9-13

1 John 4:7-12 (NRSV)

⁷ Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. ⁸ Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. ⁹ 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. ¹⁰ 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. ¹¹ Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. ¹² No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.

Matthew 5:21-37 (NRSV)

21 “You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not murder’; and ‘whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.’ 22 But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, ‘You fool,’ you will be liable to the hell of fire. 23 So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, 24 leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift. 25 Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are on the way to court with him, or your accuser may hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you will be thrown into prison. 26 Truly I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.

27 “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ 28 But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart. 29 If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. 30 And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to go into hell.

31 “It was also said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.’ 32 But I say to you that anyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of unchastity, causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

33 “Again, you have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not swear falsely, but carry out the vows you have made to the Lord.’ 34 But I say to you, Do not swear at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, 35 or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. 36 And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. 37 Let your word be ‘Yes, Yes’ or ‘No, No’; anything more than this comes from the evil one.

Revelation 21: 1-2, 9-13

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.

9 Then one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls full of the seven last plagues came and said to me, “Come, I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb.” 10 And in the spirit he carried me away to a great, high mountain and showed me the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of

heaven from God. 11 It has the glory of God and a radiance like a very rare jewel, like jasper, clear as crystal. 12 It has a great, high wall with twelve gates, and at the gates twelve angels, and on the gates are inscribed the names of the twelve tribes of the Israelites; 13 on the east three gates, on the north three gates, on the south three gates, and on the west three gates.

One Love

Yesterday, Saturday the 11th of February, I had the blessed opportunity to represent this significant congregation at the funeral of Bob Kidd. Bob was born in 1952, and his family raised him in this church. He darkened these doors countless times, singing in the youth choir and touring the country with Bob Clarke and many young people and adult sponsors. Bob Kidd took his rich baritone voice to the airwaves, broadcasting the travel reports during morning and evening rush hours, keeping Atlantans apprised. He passed away one week ago surrounded by family and friends, confident in the grace of God to save and redeem. He is now reunited with his wife of 22 years who passed away some time ago; he leaves behind Melanie, his beloved for the past two and a half years.

Yesterday the sanctuary at Acworth Presbyterian Church was packed with relatives, media colleagues, and neighbors. A bagpiper started the service and away we went, transported by the holy. Stories were shared; familiar scriptures were read; the pastor offered a fine eulogy; and emotions and gratitude for a life well-lived were expressed. Somewhere in the middle of it all Melanie stepped up to the pulpit and read a poem about angels. Then, just as she was about to walk away she said she did not speak in public like this, but she wanted us to know that over the past two and half years she and Bob had shared a very special relationship, and that he loved her like no one had ever loved her before.

After all was said and done the bagpiper struck up “Amazing Grace” as he walked down the aisle and out into the world. I turned to the stranger next to me, a kind soul who had been nice enough to share her worship bulletin, and said, *“When I die, no bagpipes.”*

Long after the last musical notes grew faint in the Piedmont Hills of north Georgia, Melanie’s testimonial is still resonating in hearts and minds: *“He loved me like no one had ever loved me before.”*

At the funeral reception I started to tell someone I just met named Shelly how touched I was by Melanie’s affirmation of love reciprocated. Shelly got animated. She said that Melanie’s statement of love reciprocated reminded her of a conversation in the TV show “This Is Us” Her face lit up as she quoted the character Kevin: *“The best thing that ever happened to me was you telling me that you’d marry me. I’m still in love with you, and I will be at our restaurant bright and early tomorrow waiting for you.”*

We all want to be respected. We all want to be recognized. And we all want to love and to be loved in return. That is not too much to ask.

To live this life we need food, water, shelter, rest, and, of course, a cell phone

within three feet.

To have a life we need meaning, purpose, fulfillment (is one Super Bowl too much to ask?), and one another.

No one is an island. No church is an island. No community, no city, no state, no nation is an island. We need one another, and at the center of that need is love. At the core of our meaning and relationships, hopes and desires is love. We all want to love and to be loved in return.

Sounds good to me. Sounds good to you. Sounds good to those around us, to those whose names we know, and to those with whom we have yet to meet and become friends.

One Love

Imagine if the book of Revelation had been placed before the Gospels, serving as a prelude, an introduction rather than afterward, as an endnote, as an exclamation point. Imagine if the Gospels on Matthew, Mark, Luke and John were introduced by John of Patmos. In Revelation 21: 1-2, John of Patmos said, *“Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.”*

The revelation of the love of God was made incarnate in Jesus Christ; this same love dwells with us, this one love is at home in us, and may this true love be revealed to the world through the whole people of God. First comes the revelation, then the incarnation. First we are shown love, then we are to embody love. First we discover that we are loveable, then we discern how to love one another. First we see and understand how vital unconditional love is to building human community, then it slowly dawns on us over time how awesome a responsibility it is to be God’s people, to be ambassadors, followers, disciples of Christ called to bring hope and healing into the human condition.

Love knows no colors, no borders, no boundaries, no limits or conditions. Love simply is.

In John 13, Jesus gave us a direct order, saying, *“I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you.”*

The author of First John carried this forward, saying, *“Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God... Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.”*

Jesus the Rabbi, Jesus the Teacher, Jesus the Pioneer and Perfecter of the Faith,

Jesus the Child of God, as Interpreter of the Law of Moses, the Torah, He drew deeply upon Love as the prerequisite for grasping the nuance, the purpose, and the application of the Law. He said, *“Do not think that I have come to abolish the*

Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them." The Law is fulfilled in and through love.

Reminds me of the patient who said, "Doc, when I move my arm like this, it hurts." The doctor responded, "So don't do it!"

Jesus took the Law seriously, and because He did so He applied a principle that is deeper than rules, a spirituality that undergirds both religion and regulations.

For example, says Jesus, the Torah tells you 'Thou shall not commit murder,' but I say unto you that to be so angry at someone that you harm them emotionally or physically, spiritually or psychologically is like killing a soul. If your anger is eating you up inside and your angry behavior is hurting someone else, don't do it! Help is here for all who seek it, who knock, who ask.

For example, says Jesus, the Torah tells you 'Thou shall not commit adultery,' but I say unto you that the way you treat women matters just as much if not more. So don't do it!

When we see people as objects we objectify them. People become an It, a Them, an Other, rather than as an extension of ourselves, worthy to be loved. The way you behave around the whole people of God matters, be they children or men or women, Christians, Muslims, or Jews, regardless of sexual orientation or ethnicity or social status, everyone should be treated with respect.

Jesus took the complexity and emotional distance of the Torah and made it real to us on a personal level. There is real security in this. Being loved is like having a security blanket. When you are secure in your love, you trust. You have confidence. You can conquer mountains, oceans, problems, challenges, anything. You are omnipotent. You can fly.

One Love

Love God and live into the trust that God loves you. Do so and you won't feel threatened at all. As Paul said, "*Nothing can separate you from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.*"

So whenever a neighbor or friend or coworker or favorite athlete calls God by a different name or prays a little differently or sings spiritual songs in a different tune, you do not feel threatened or insecure or like the slice of the spiritual pie is suddenly too small or that there might not be room for you in heaven due to overcrowding by tax collectors or sinners or immigrants.

My Bible tells me in Revelation that there are 12 gates in heaven. My Bible tells me in Romans that God is a giver of grace. My Bible tells me of Jesus' modelling that since God's grace is true we will all be saved. My Bible tells me in John that there is a room prepared for all souls in God's house. My Bible tells me in 1st John that all souls are beloved and worthy to be loved.

One Love

You see, when you put a face to an issue, it changes everything. When we put a face to an issue our perspective changes. When an issue has a face it

is no longer an issue. It is personal. Issues generate fears. Personal relationships overcome fears. The difference...the difference is love. When we love people, when we put people first, when we care because we love, then our love leads us in our decision making, our attitudes, our ethical considerations.

Recently a young woman in a hijab was in an Atlanta coffee shop. She was minding her own business when a young man she had never met before approached and insulted her and asked if she had a Green Card. She recorded their encounter and uploaded it onto YouTube. She also happens to be my friend and yours. If you came to the 9-11 service our church co-hosted last September then you heard Asma Elhuni deliver the keynote speech.

She shared that day that Muslim police and firefighters and citizens died on 9-11-01. She said that back in 2001, she and her family wanted to join fellow Americans in grieving. But the ethnic racism and religious bigotry directed at Muslims thwarted their efforts and hurt their feelings and relationships with Christians. Therefore on 9-11-2016, she invited us to grieve alongside her; she asked us to grieve all the souls lost that tragic day and since.

At the core of our grief for what we have lost and loved is...love. We all want to be respected. We all want to be recognized. We all want to be loved and to love in return. We all want to be able to testify, *"He loved me like no one had ever loved me before."*

One Love

There is a conversation in a Harry Potter novel (the 5th year at Hogwarts) by J. K. Rowling that offers surprisingly high aspirations and meaning. A character named Luna Lovegood articulates the power of Love to overcome Hate.

Luna Lovegood: [to Harry, speaking about her father] *We believe you, by the way. That He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named is back, and you fought him, and the Ministry and the Prophet are conspiring against you and Dumbledore.*

Harry Potter: *Thanks. Seems you're about the only ones that do.*

Luna Lovegood: *I don't think that's true. But I suppose that's how he wants you to feel.*

Harry Potter: *What do you mean?*

Luna Lovegood: *Well if I were You-Know-Who, I'd want you to feel cut off from everyone else. Because if it's just you alone you're not as much of a threat.*

Preach it, Luna.

Hate wants isolation. Craves it. Demands it. Insists on its own way. Hate is a jealous god. Hate -- or Evil -- wants you to think you are all alone. Or that there are Others who are not your allies. Or that you are cut off from your neighbors, even though all of us are in the same darn boat, same planet, same time.

Such is not the way of love. Such is not the way of God's Movement, the Church.

Hate tempts us to judge, to objectify, to castigate, to legislate isolation and discrimination, to think or act or talk or text like we are better or more right than anyone else. When we do this it hurts.

So don't do this! says Jesus; I say unto you, choose instead to love.

One Love

The Christian Church affirms and celebrates that there are many practices of spiritual and religious love of God and one another. When we die and go to meet our Maker, God is not going to ask if you were in the right religion. God is going to ask if your religion led you to love. Did you feed someone? Did you clothe the naked, visit the imprisoned, comfort the grieving, welcome the stranger? Did you love someone like he or she had never been loved before?

All this is to say the love is primary. Love is first through the door. Love makes a way. Love always wins.

We give the last word to Bono and U2's unifying song, "One"

*One love / One blood / One life
You got to do what you should
One life / With each other
Sisters and my / Brothers
One life / But we're not the same
We get to / Carry each other / Carry each other
Can You hear us coming Lord / Can You hear us call
Feel us knocking / We're knocking at Your door*

All power be to the Creator, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen!