

If you were to lay out 1 John word by word on the floor and have a person representing every word in Chapter 4 jump up every time their assigned word is read, I'm guessing the person, who was assigned the word "love," would be exhausted. But perhaps there's a reason for the repetition in 1 John?! Perhaps those to whom the author was writing needed a reminder?! A little context behind 1 John: The author, who some presume is John and whom we will call John, is writing the first of three letters, about a decade after the Gospel of John was written, to a group of people who identify with Jesus, and yet there has been a schism, a divide, within the community over theology- specifically Christology, and ethics. As far as the writer of this letter is concerned, "those who have left the community of faith have denied that Jesus was God's commissioned agent or Son, the Messiah, and that he was a human being. They did not love (2:9-11) and claimed to be sinless (1:6-10). This letter explains the separation of the groups and affirms the faithfulness of those who remain" (*The Discipleship Study Bible*). John is reminding those remaining of who and whose they are- of their identify and behavior as followers of Jesus. In the current context here at Triune, we're nearing the end of our summer sermon series: *God with Skin On: Jesus as...* and today we're looking at Jesus as Love, the divine attribute that embodies all others. There are many, many, many Bible verses a preacher could teach and preach about Jesus as Love. But there was one in particular that came to mind for me. As a child, I remember learning a [song](#) that began, "Beloved, let us love one another, for love is of God and everyone that loveth is born of God and knoweth God. He that knoweth not (clap, clap, clap), knoweth not God for God is love. Beloved, let us love one another 1 John 4:7 and 8." Yes, when I learned scripture as a child it was in the King James translation. At first it may sound silly, but at certain times-

for example when I'm about to lose my mind with other people, I think due to the work of the Holy Spirit- this song and often [another](#) (love (4xs), the gospel in one word is love...) come to mind. Another reminder. Especially today as I read and listen to everything going on in our world, nation, and in and around the Upstate of SC, I know that I need this reminder found in 1 John. How about you? But before turning to God's word for us this day, let us first pray together. **PRAY.**

READ.

I saw a cartoon this week that I've seen before. The cartoonist drew the disciples standing in a group on one side and Jesus standing in front of them on the other side. Jesus says to them, "Just love! It's not complicated. You only complicate it because you don't want to do it" (nakedpastor.com). We can all be on board- perhaps- with Jesus as love and possibly even with Jesus loving the little children- all the children of the world. It's just the next step that begins to divide us. To whom do we share Christ's love? To only certain people who look, think, vote and act like us? To only other Christians? To only people in need? Have you ever heard something on one day and nodded your head up and down in agreement- even said, "Amen"- maybe even to today's text- and then two days later you've already forgotten and are not living the thing you agreed to out?! Think of going on a diet or quitting a habit or living in Jesus' footsteps. You're going strong one minute and then you're feeling weak and defeated. It's easy to agree to something but a whole other thing to try and live it out. It's Discipleship 101. Faith...it's all that easy and all that hard. When we think we're the source of Love, that's when we're in trouble, and I'm not talking about good trouble. For God is love. Period. God is the source and foundation of all love. Here John advocates for a "top-

down” understanding of love, where God is the source. It goes something like this: love flows from God to us and from us to our neighbors. Our ability to love our neighbor is tied to whether or not we know God and whether we acknowledge and receive God’s overflowing love for us. This love is demonstrated by God in two ways: the giving of the Son and by the gift of the Holy Spirit. In other words, God’s love is witnessed in and through Jesus and the Holy Spirit (vv. 13-16). And such life-giving love is too wonderful to keep to ourselves. For to know God’s love is to overflow with God’s love. So then how can we possibly love God while we hate God’s beloved? There are no rationalizations or excuses for John. I am sad to admit it, but I ask myself this question pretty much every day. Hate is a strong word, isn’t it? Yet, it’s not stronger than LOVE. Paul reminds us of this in his letter to the church in Rome that nothing in all of creation will ever be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord- not even death (8:37-39). Nothing! Nada! And “Jesus Christ knows the worst about you. Nonetheless, he is the one who loves you the most” (A. W. Tozer).

You see...it all begins with God’s love. Y’all know I love music of many genres. One of my favorite bands-even if it sounds cliché- is U2. I almost asked the musicians if they would play *Pride: In the Name of Love* today, but I didn’t. While this song was written as a tribute to the late Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., it also makes me think of Jesus, whom King preached about and followed. While Jesus was both human and God, as human beings, we look to Jesus to be the bridge or mediator between us and God. We look to Jesus to show us how to live and to love. God with skin on comes to us as Love. Some of the most poignant lyrics in this song for me as these: *One man come in the name of love; One man, he come and go; One*

man comes he to justify; One man to overthrow...In the name of love-What more in the name of love. In case we ever forget this basic, essential fact of our faith, 1 John makes it crystal clear; he doesn't mince words. "Those who say, "I love God," and hate a brother or sister are liars" (v.20). God's mission has and is and will always be about love. This is why it's hard for people outside of and within Christianity to believe that some of us who call ourselves "Christian," are doing what God commands of us: to love one another as God has loved us. We might sing *Jesus Love Me* at the top of our lungs but we don't always live it out. Jesus as love is easy to understand and very difficult to live out. I wonder sometimes if it's because we don't really believe that we're God's beloved. "God's love does not depend on our initiative or on our worthiness. We don't have to reach out to God or even believe in God in order to be loved. We don't have to clean up our act before God can love us. We don't have to measure up to some standard in order to be lovable. No, God showers love on us whether we deserve it or not" (Judith Jones, workingpreacher.org). God's love, made visible and present in Jesus, is the source for the love we share with others. And if Jesus shows us what God's love is like, then there can be no doubt how far our love for others must extend: to every single human being. Again, such love can never originate with us. It is not our own, weak, limited love that we share with God's beloved. No, we are called to open ourselves to Christ's love so that he can love others through us. When we love one another, we represent God to the world.

I read a meme this week that said, "God is love. If your religion does not make you more compassionate, more impassioned to help the vulnerable, more full of mercy, then stop saying it's about God. It's about something else entirely. Fear,

control, power, maybe. But it's not about God" (Faith In the Mess). We must, therefore, challenge ourselves to push beyond our comfort zones to do new things. This is how we love as Christ loved, and as God loves us. "Every time we step beyond where we'd rather be, what we'd rather do, into what might embarrass or negatively impact us in order to share God's love, we answer this call. This is our summons. God is love. Be bold. Don't fear. Share yourself. Do love. This is what will sustain us in unity, strength, and the abiding love of God" (Sherri Brown, workingpreacher.org). The late Rev. Dr. William Sloane Coffin, who was the chaplain at Yale some years ago, tells the story of pushing back against intellectual idolatry. He observed how students thought, "I think, therefore I am" was what it was all about, and Yale was encouraging them to think this way. So Coffin suggested a subversive counter-proposal, "I love, therefore I am." This Latin phrase can also be translated to make the point more radical, "I am because I love." Or as the farmer-poet Wendell Berry put it, I only live to the extent that I love. In his book of poetry entitled *Leavings* (2012), Berry points the way for us in a short poem-prayer that reads, *I know that I have life only insofar as I have love. I have no love except it come from Thee. Help me, please, to carry this candle against the wind* (Dan Clendenin, journeywithjesus.net, 2024). Yes, Lord, help us to love as you have first loved us in divided times and among divided people!

Friends, we never grow beyond our need to hear again the gospel of God's love in Jesus Christ. The most reliable way to live in the love of Jesus, a love so freely and completely given to us, is to love one of God's other children and allow yourself to be loved in return. We don't have to have degrees in order to love. We don't have to be able to put words together in order to love. We don't have to have clean

records in order to love. We don't have to have a roof over our head in order to love. We don't have to have it all together in order to love. We know God's love, first and foremost, in and through Jesus; and we know God's love because we have witnessed it in love for one another. That doesn't mean that you have to like everyone; it means that you have to love them. Ok, then, what does God's love in Jesus Christ look like? The best I can do is to explain what I've witnessed among you in my five plus years of serving as one of your pastors. You make me believe and remember that God is love. Or more accurately, the way in which God's love has allowed you to love me and to love one another has made me grow in my faith and I invite you to dare to believe or to grow more in your faith too (Nadia Bolz Weber). Here at Triune our mission is to share Christ's love, and I've witnessed this is too many ways to share them all, so I'll name several. God's love in Jesus Christ looks like flying with someone to the Cleveland Clinic for treatment because they don't have anyone to go with them, and they are afraid. God's love in Jesus Christ looks like picking someone up and driving them to Triune to spend time in community in the Art Room because they know that this person is isolated from community and feeling low. God's love in Jesus Christ looks like helping someone going through a divorce to move and not asking too many nose questions along the way. God's love in Jesus Christ looks like bold women who take care of their friend and her partner when she is ill and can no longer care for herself. God's love in Jesus Christ looks like picking someone up from jail and working to find them a bed and then taking them to rehab without judgment. God's love in Jesus Christ looks like looking someone in the eye, meeting them where they are and listening to them. God's love in Jesus Christ looks like having

to say no to a person who wants us to say yes. God's love in Jesus Christ looks like a table where all are fed are none are worthy.

After reading and studying today's text and thinking about Jesus as Love, even though I am still aware of the world's suffering, the inexplicable anxiety and fear within and all around, I also feel a little more grounded in the Living Presence of love, and I hope that you do too. I'm reminded of another [song](#) I learned as a child. Love is something if you give it away (3xs)...you end up having more (v. It's just like a magic penny hold it tight and you won't have any- lend it, spend it and you'll have so many- they'll roll all over the floor). It takes a lot of courage to choose the Way of Love. To be with things and people as they are, yet have faith and be agents of love. To embrace the power of the Holy Spirit within us as a people and world to heal, reconcile, renew, and fulfill God-created order. In our efforts to love, we will surely face those who think we are crazy and hopeless. Not everyone will see or want things the way we do. Sin will persist. We will meet our own shadow and limitation. And yet, may we exhale, inhale, and keep on with a heart and mind of love. For as one Christ follower says, "in a world so torn apart by rivalry, anger, and hatred, we have the privileged vocation to be living signs of a love that can bridge all divisions and heal all wounds" (Henri Nouwen). At the end of the day, the invitation is to follow, and the commandment is to love. It really is as simple and as hard as that. Amen.