

Greater Than Our Heart

John 15:9-17; 1 John 3:11-20

I think one of the most difficult features of trying to wrap our minds around a faith in God is that, if there really is a God, he is absolute. By which I mean to say that, if God is something more than a figment of our imagination, then it is we who are at his mercy, it is we who will be shaped and formed as we engage with him and not him. I think it was Albert Schweitzer who said that the German theologians of his day looked down the long, deep well of history and what they saw reflected back at them was a Jesus who looked a lot like a modern, German theologian.

Because in our heart of hearts, we don't want God to be different or absolute. We want him to be like us! We want to worship someone malleable enough so that our prejudices and preferences and wants and needs and dreams won't have to bend to any ideals that seem unreasonable and at the end of the day prove to be beyond our reach. Heaven forbid that we should have a religion that confronts us with problems that we can't solve! So the Pharisees of Jesus' day manipulated the teachings of Moses so that they got the best of both worlds.

They took the breathtaking righteousness and holiness that God commanded at Sinai and reduced it to a sort of ritual particularity. Eat right, wash right, worship according to a certain etiquette and you can satisfy God without having to deal with matters of the heart, without having to turn from that self-serving, self-exalting state of mind that is our default position until we actually take the word of God to heart. So the Pharisees saw animals sacrificed for their sins at a bloody altar and never learned to be afraid. They took it mean that if a man could afford a goat, he could afford to sin.

We learn in Matthew's gospel that the men took their wedding vows with their fingers crossed, imagining all the while that, if things ever got rocky, they could send their bride to the curb because Moses allowed it and God wouldn't mind. The women were less prone to think that way only because in those days the deck was stacked against them. But when Jesus heard the men in Matthew 19, he reminded men and women alike that faith in God and love between neighbors and within families was a matter of the heart. "*It was not that way in the beginning!*", Jesus told them. Before the Fall happened and sin took hold, a different kind of love ruled human relationships.

This pushing and shoving and elbowing for advantage in relationship was not what God put men and women and children on the planet to do. In Matthew 22, Jesus taught that all the doctrine that came down Mt. Sinai, all the particularity that Moses gave Israel to observe was meant to evoke a faith in God's people that first and foremost was a matter of the heart. So when a scribe asked him, "... *Which is the great commandment in the Law?*" ... Jesus said to him, *'You shall*

love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And the second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’’

The point here is not that the rest of the commandments don't matter. God is absolute. What God commands must be obeyed, what God forbids must be avoided. The point here is that everything God commands and forbids is designed to evoke in us, first, love for God and then, love for each other, love for other believers. Because in Moses' day, a believer's neighbor was a believer, an Israelite.

So beginning with Moses and continuing with Jesus, God's people were always called to love each other first. Why? Because God's people learn to love strangers and sojourners, and even enemies by learning to love each other first. From the first moment God ever had a people, through Noah and Abraham and Moses, down to Jesus, it has been the lives we live together, the worship we offer, the service we render, the families we make and the covenants we build, all this is the laboratory where people learn the love our ancestors left behind them when they left the garden.

This is why in our Call to Worship from John's gospel, on the night of the Last Supper, Jesus talked to his disciples about love. *“As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you.”*, Jesus told them. *“Abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you'll abide in my love.”*

John opens our Scripture Lesson this morning by remembering Jesus' words, *“...this is the message you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another.”*. *“Not like Cain!”* John goes on to say. Cain was a unique and relevant case for John to raise with the early Christians because Cain's blood feud with his brother Abel arose from a worship service. From all outward appearances, Cain and Abel both were believers in the one true God. And in Genesis 4, they both appeared before the Almighty with a sacrifice that seemed correct by according to the particulars that governed worship and sacrifice during the Old Testament centuries.

Abel brought an animal sacrifice, a blood sacrifice, and Cain brought a sacrifice from the crops of his field, some combination of grain and fruit and drink offering. And some Christians have wanted to think that Abel's offering was accepted because only a blood sacrifice could atone for sin, and Cain's was rejected because grain and fruit and drink wasn't the correct combination, didn't look forward to Christ's sacrifice on the cross, but I don't think that's the case at all. Throughout the Old Testament, grain and fruit and drink offerings were accepted by the priests and placed before the Lord.

The problem with Cain's sacrifice wasn't in the particulars of his worship, it was in the condition of his heart. Last week, I told the story of how my dad and mom bought me a dinged up, used

bike when I was around 7 or 8 years old. And I was happy with my bike until a few years later they bought my brother a bigger, better, shiny new bike when he was around 7. And I told you that it was a matter of timing. My parents were simply wealthier when it was my brother's turn to get a bike.

The truth is that other factors may have influenced my parents decision. My brother and I are actually quite different. He took after Dad. I took after Mom. He was careful and fussy about everything he owned. I broke or lost just about every toy my parents ever gave me. John maintained his bike and eventually used it to get a paper route. I rode my bike into the ground and probably left it to rust away in the backyard. He made money with his bike and his newspapers. I made money with shovels and rakes because shovels and rakes don't need much in the way of maintenance.

The point being that to love different people sometimes you need to treat them differently. I think the feud between Cain and Abel erupted over which brother God would choose to lead humanity once Adam had lived out his days. I think God expressed approval for Abel that Cain wanted for himself and didn't think he could live without. Now me, I got over not getting a new bike because over time it became clear to me that, however imperfectly my parents loved us, they loved us equally, all three. And if you know you're loved, it doesn't make sense to let your heart get bent over a bike.

God said as much to Cain after the worship service where he had shown special approval for Abel. God said to Cain, "*If you do well, will you not be accepted?*". In other words, you don't have to rule the world to be loved and accepted by me. We're not all meant to do the same things and have the same things. John the Apostle says about Cain that he was "*of the evil one*". In other words, every human soul is confronted with a choice of which gospel he or she will believe.

The Serpent, the evil one, has promised us that, if we'll fend for ourselves, grab what is ours, we will be "*like God*", absolute, knowing and defining good and evil for our-selves. Jesus on the other hand has promised that, if we will become like little children, obey commandments, keep covenants, accept from our Father the bike that suits us best, we will have joy, Jesus said, we will become his friends, his Father will give us whatever we ask.

And John goes on to warn us that, to the extent we trust the Father to love us each as he sees fit, to the extent we love each other first, seek his kingdom first, to the extent we treat God as God and allow him to be different and absolute, to that extent the world will hate us. Because to live for God and allow him to act like God is to show up the Serpent's gospel as the lie that it always ever was.

And the proof of the pudding, the indispensable sign that we trust the Father and believe his gospel is the love we express to other believers in church. John writes, *"We know that we have passed out of death into life because we love the brothers and sisters. Whoever does not love abides in death."* In other words, John is warning us that it is possible to be like Cain, to offer a worship that is particularly correct while still holding out for a place and standing that we don't think we can live without. And if some turn of events, some change in relationship deprives us of that place, a resentment not too far from murder can arise in our hearts.

In rare instances, it can even result in murder between people all of whom claim to be believers. The priests and rabbis of Jesus' day put him to death rather than see him take his place as Israel's rightful king. And Jesus let them do it in order to become that sacrifice that Abel foreshadowed in the first recorded human worship service back in Genesis 4. John writes, *"By this we know love, that Christ laid down his life for us, and we ourselves ought to lay down our lives for the brothers and sisters."* The point being that our king showed toward us the selflessness and devotion that we should show for the brothers and sisters in church if we really trust him.

And the love this calls for expresses itself in absolute, objective terms. It is not just warm feelings and good intentions. Gospel love involves sacrifices of time, energy, affection and wealth. John writes that to see one's *"brother in need"* and to *"close our heart to him"* is to demonstrate that we really haven't believed in and trusted the love that Father has promised to provide for us. We will be generous with the stuff we know the Father is able to provide for us, first of all, with each other.

It matters because the love that exists among us and between us here at church is the proof that our hearts have bent to that absolute, objective gospel that Jesus came to teach us. Because at the end of the day, a real faith in God is an intimidating business. John began this latter by warning us that *"...God is light and in him there is no darkness at all. If we say that we have fellowship with him and walk in the darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth."*

So how can we know that what has happened between us and God is real and not the sort of self delusion that waylaid the Pharisees? John writes, *"Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and truth. By this we shall know that we are of the truth and shall persuade our heart before him in whatever our heart condemns us, for God is greater than our heart and knows all things."* Which brings us back to the original problem. God is absolute and different than us.

It is impossible for us as individuals to know that we have really engaged with a being who is perfect Light, impossible to tell in a vacuum whether our hearts have bent to his gospel or whether we are only serving and kidding ourselves. What John offers us as the way to learn to

love and trust our Father is to learn to love and serve the people around us in church. If there is any Cain inside us, if we are bent to have something or be something that God never wanted for us, trust me, the give and take of brother sister love relationships will bring it to light.

And then it will become a matter of whether we are willing to bend to the absolute, objective realities of what the brothers and sisters need from us. If we will "*lay down our lives for the brothers and sisters*" as Jesus laid down his life for us, then God will deal with us even when our own hearts condemn because we can't make it all nice and sweet and tidy. God doesn't need that! John tells us, "*...God is greater than our hearts*". He can deal with us, forgive us, heal and help us even after some turn of events or relationship puts us in a funk. That is the gospel truth that Cain couldn't wrap his mind around. But we can, if we'll only believe in grace and persevere with each other.