

God's Love Reaches Out First

First in a series on 1 John for August, 2024 at First Church in Hartland during Pastor Marilyn's Sabbatical. (for August 4, 2024)

Scripture: 1 John 1:1-4; 3:1-3; 4:10

Key Thought: God in his love, reaches out to us first.

Intro idea:

Ian Pitt-Watson tells the story about his youngest child, Rosemary. When she was three, she was given a little ragdoll, which quickly became an inseparable companion. She loved that little ragdoll and often carried it with her. Soon the ragdoll became more rag and less doll. The sensible thing would've been to trash the ragdoll but that was unthinkable for anyone who loved Rosemary. If you loved her, you had to love the doll – it was part of the package. Rosemary's love had somehow given value to the lifeless doll.

What a great picture for us of one of the basic, yet most profound theological truths that we need to learn as Christians. The Bible teaches that God's love for us is defining. Like the story of Rosemary and her doll but on a much deeper level, it is God's love for us that has created meaning and worth for us. God's love began it all. The Genesis creation story relates how God walked in the Garden of Eden to talk with the first couple. God desired a loving relationship with his human creations. But then, humankind fell from innocence and broke that first fellowship with God. Yet God in his love had a second plan to take the initiative to restore us to himself.

In the Epistle of First John, the apostle John majors on the theme of God's love. He talks about how God has expressed his love for us, how we should return that love, and how we should learn from God's love how to love one another. During the month of August, I hope we can explore these themes together.

We begin today where 1 John begins with God in his love reaching out to us. There are three ways that God has taken the initiative to love us first.

Reaching out to us through the Word

Notice that in the very first verse, John calls Jesus the "Word of life." The word, "word," reminds us that one of the ways God has shown his love for us is to communicate with us.

As a pastor, it has been my privilege over the years to talk to many couples preparing for marriage. I often asked them to talk about how they could make their marriage grow. The topic of communication

soon comes up. Somehow we instinctively know that love communicates. People in love tell each other so often. They communicate honestly, tenderly, and often with the object of their affection.

God has communicated with us as a human race often and honestly too. The book of Hebrews records,

In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son. Heb 1:1-2

God reaches out to us first by communicating with us. The Old Testament is the record of the prophets' messages. The New Testament is where we learn about what Jesus taught. Both are God's messages reaching out to communicate with us.

More than once, Jesus pointedly said that his teaching came from his Father in heaven. For example,

These words you hear are not my own; they belong to the Father who sent me. John 14:24 NIV

So, it is super important that we hear and read the words of Jesus, because they are God's message to this world, and they reveal so much. In one sense, the Bible is God's love letter to us.

But the Bible teaches us that God continues to reach out to us personally today too through the Holy Spirit. Jesus told the disciples that the Holy Spirit would continue Jesus' teaching ministry. Jesus said,

But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you. John 14:26

God does not send new Scripture, but the "still small voice" of God's Spirit in us still assures us and leads us. It is very seldom audible, but we come to understand that sometimes the thoughts that are arising in our mind as we read the Bible particularly have not originated with us but have been planted there by the divine messenger as real-time and contemporary expressions of the love of God for us and others around us.

What kinds of Words does the Holy Spirit communicate today?

- Sometimes God's Spirit speaks words of correction when we need it. The Holy Spirit works with our conscience to keep us on the right track.
- Sometimes we feel reassured and encouraged. God by his nature desires to bring us hope and joy and encouragement. So, the Holy Spirit's words to us are often of this nature.
- God also seeks to prompt his children toward spiritual growth or spiritual next steps.
- Sometimes God's Holy Spirit gives us guidance.

So, the Word of God in Scripture and spoken through Jesus and in the Holy Spirit ministry in our hearts are all indications of God's love making the first move, reaching out to us as a human race and as individuals. We can praise God that he is a God who speaks through Scripture, through Jesus and through the Holy Spirit. His speaking is an act of loving initiative toward a rebel world.

Reaching out to us through a Life

But if you are in love with someone, you crave more than the words on the page. You yearn for the presence of the loved one next to you. The Apostle John speaks of the second initiative of the love of God. While we were still far from God, while human beings were wandering in a maze of their own making, God the Father sent his only Son, a perfect life to this broken planet, to be an in-person Guide for us. Yes, much more than a Guide, a Sacrifice as well! God knew we needed more than Words, as powerful as they were. We needed an incarnation. We needed someone with whom we could interact. The culmination of God's speaking to us was in sending his Son Jesus whom John calls "The Word" not just because he spoke God's message to us, but also because he was in his person a message from God. John described God's sending of Jesus in very personal terms.

That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched—this we proclaim concerning the Word of life. The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us" (1 Jn 1:1, 2 NIV).

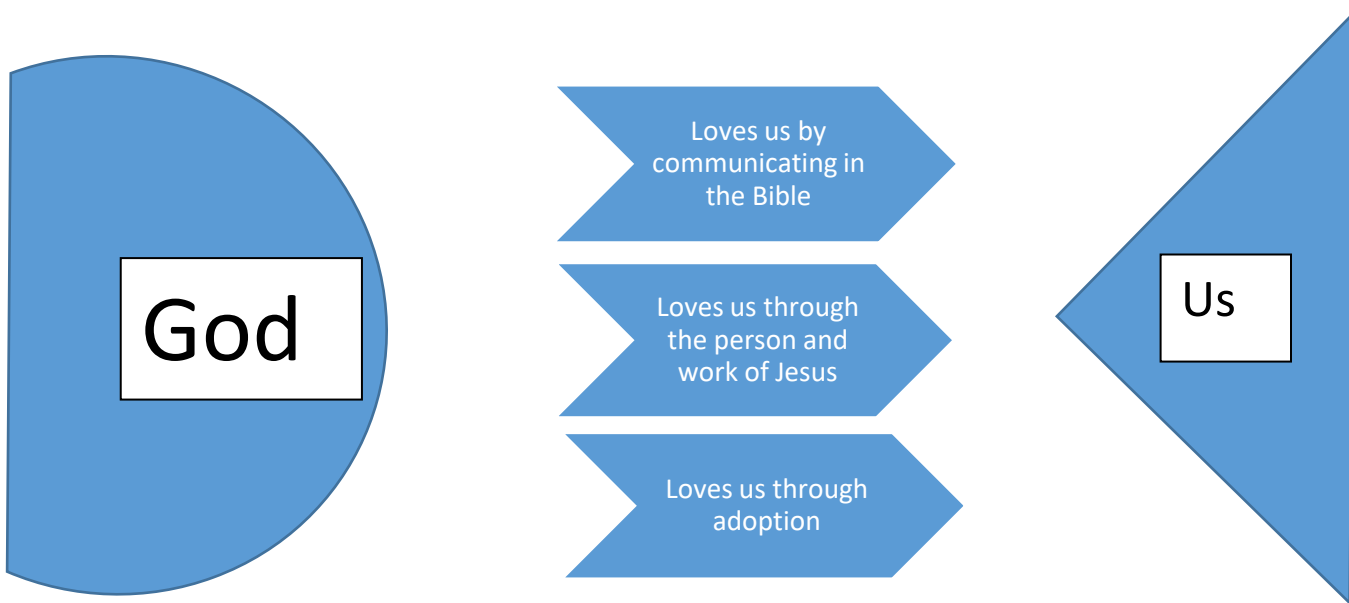
Jesus was a special life who brought life, eternal life for you and me. As John said in his Gospel, "In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind" (John 1:4 NIV).

Jesus told a frightening parable that puts in perspective God's love in sending his Son. It is the parable of the landowner (Matthew 21:33-46). Jesus says that the kingdom of God is like a landowner who built a fine vineyard and then put tenant farmers over it. But when the landowner sent messengers for his share of the crops, the tenant farmers beat them and refused the request. In this hostile atmosphere, the landowner decided to send his son thinking, "They will respect my son." But instead, the wicked tenant farmers killed the son thinking that the vineyard would be theirs. Of course, it would not be, because the landowner would strip the tenant farmers of their responsibility and give the vineyard's oversight to someone else who would act properly. In this parable, we can clearly identify the players. The landowner is the heavenly Father. The vineyard is the people of God. The tenant farmers are the Jewish leaders over the centuries. The first group of messengers are the prophets of the Old Testament. The Son is Jesus himself.

Our point today is to see that the landowner, our heavenly Father, was willing to risk sending his Son for the sake of the vineyard. That's God's love reaching out for the sake of people like you and me.

The Apostle John wrote later in this letter. "This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins" (1 Jn 4:10 NIV).

So, the second way we see the love of God extended is through the life and death and resurrection of Jesus. God was making the first move again by sending his Son as an in-person message of love to reconcile us back to himself. All our acts of faith are simply responses to the love of God reaching out to us in Jesus.



Lavishing Love

The third statement that I would like us to consider is found in chapter 3 of First John. John is continuing to impress us with the lavish nature of the love of God. John's thought focuses on how awesome it is to have the privilege to be the children of God. John introduced this idea in his gospel when he wrote,

"To those who believed, He gave the right to become children of God," John 1:12

Now in his first letter John reminds his readers again what a privilege it is to have been adopted into the family of God through God's Holy Spirit as he writes,

"How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!" 1 Jn 3:1 NIV

Paul explained in Romans,

The Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship. And by him we cry, "Abba, Father." The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children.
Rom 8:15,16

This is not something we earned; it is the gift of God's grace! It is God reaching out to lift us up and place us in his family! Awesome!

But John does not stop with our adoption into God's family, as great as that is. He goes on to remind us that our spiritual status as children of God now has more implications for us in the future.

“We know that when Christ appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.” 1 John 3:2

This hope, he says, drives us to purify our lives. It also helps us to look forward to what God has in store for those who love him. God the Father is not done lavishing his love.

Conclusion:

So, what difference does this all make for our daily lives?

1. God wants you to feel loved! Sometimes we don't. Humans mistreat us. Circumstances conspire against us. Disease including chemical imbalances in the brain make it difficult for us to feel loved. But God wants us to understand that at the deepest level of the universe – by the Creator of the universe; by the one who created us in our Mother's womb, we are loved! And if Rosemary's ragdoll received just a little worth because it was loved by Rosemary, how very much more have we received the ultimate in personal value because we are greatly loved by God Almighty. Jesus in his high priestly prayer assured us of the Father's love for us (John 17:22,23).

We who have fled to Jesus for refuge can feel secure in the love of God as Paul wrote for us,

I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord. Rom 8:38-39 NIV

2. The second difference is a corollary of the first. God wants us to respond to him, not primarily out of duty or fear, but out of love. When we understand God's love for us, we naturally respond by loving God in return. When we are in love with someone, the root of our motivation changes! God knows that if we cannot feel loved, we will not be able to respond in love to others well either. But once we are “rooted and established” in the love of God to borrow Paul's phrase, then we are able to share God's unselfish agape love with others freely. That's why Paul, writing to the divided church in Corinth pointed out for them “a more excellent way,” which was the way of love in described 1 Cor. 13.

So how can respond this morning to God's overflowing love that has reached out to us and continues to reach out?

- We respond to God's love when we acknowledge the things that separate us from God's love: our sins, our spiritual apathy, and the distractions that have come between us. It's a golden moment in parenting when a child says I'm sorry and melts a barrier that had arisen. It's the same in our relationship with God. You can respond to God's love today by telling him you are truly sorry for something that has been creating friction between you.
- We respond to God's love by opening our minds and hearts to God's offer of forgiveness and new life through Jesus. John in his Gospel uses a hospitality metaphor to describe our

response to God. “But as many as received him... to those he gave the right to become children of God.” The Jewish nation had not received him – they had refused his words. But when we listen and believe, we give hospitality in our hearts to a loving God who is reaching out to us. You can respond to God’s love today by opening your heart to Jesus remembering that he said, “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness for they will be filled” (Matt. 5:6).

- We respond to God’s love as we lift our voices through worship and praise to God. Worship is not just for Sunday; every day God deserves our praise. You can respond to God’s love by including a time of praise and thanksgiving in your prayers each day this week.
- Finally, we respond to God’s love by passing it on to others. You know how they say, “smiles are contagious” or “laughter is contagious.” Well. God’s love is contagious. When we know God loves us, we are influenced by that love to do acts of kindness and caring, to speak words of comfort and encouragement to those around us. You can respond to God’s love today by thinking of someone for whom you can do or say something loving.

Remember today, You are loved by God more than you know. He is reaching out to you in love. Let us respond as God’s Spirit directs. AMEN.

I plan to preach my three August messages all from 1 John

Aug 4: God's Love Reaches Out First

August 18: Loving God in Return

August 25: Loving Others Because of God's Love

Outline for Aug. 4

Title: God's Love Reaches Out First

Scripture: 1 John 1:1-4; 3:1-3; 4:10

Key Thought: In three ways, God has taken the initiative to express his love to us.

By communicating with us through the Bible

Through the person and work of Jesus

By adopting us as his children

Hymns:

Love Divine, All Loves Excelling #517

Who You Say I Am

In Memory of the Savior's Love #405

Prayers:

Call to Worship: We rejoice this morning in your mercies, O Lord! They are new every day. We celebrate the wholeness that we find in following you and being a part of your redeemed family. We lift our voices in praise for you are worthy! May the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord our Rock and our Redeemer!

Prayer of Awareness: Our Heavenly Father, we come to you to be taught to love unselfishly. Help us to be aware when our tongue is sharp, or our motives are unkind. May we open our inner being to your Spirit's shaping impulses urging us toward gentleness, faithfulness and kindness. In Jesus' name we pray, AMEN.

Prayer of Dedication: Thank you Father for giving us the ability to earn. Thank you for having placed us in a country of abundance. Forgive us when we take your gifts to us for granted. Please accept these tithes and offerings which we are returning to you. May your kingdom prosper and those in need receive help through our gifts. In Jesus' name we pray, AMEN.