

The Passage That Interprets Us I John 4:7-21

Week by week in Sunday School and worship you and I read and seek to interpret the Bible. We follow certain methods in our efforts to understand the scriptures. We try to place a verse or passage within a historical framework and to see why it was written, by whom and to whom, when and where. In this process we employ tools for Biblical study—commentaries, theological systems, and personal experience. We conduct this task in the prayer that the Holy Spirit will guide us to truth and to the message God would have us hear.

Today's text from First John is one of my favorite passages of scripture. It describes the love of God and how God's love touches our hearts and affects our actions and the way we feel about ourselves. For me it is on a par with Paul's description of love in the thirteenth chapter of First Corinthians. Last week I went about my usual method of reading and re-reading the text, thinking about what the text could mean, and studying my Biblical commentaries. I found an interesting statement in *The New Interpreter's Bible* by Clifton Black who did the study of the Letters of John for that series. Black wrote that when we take the message here seriously, we find that "we do not interpret I John. It interprets us." (XII, 434)

I like that approach. I think it might be well for us simply to consider the magnificent lines in this passage and let them speak to us as they will. When I was taking an art appreciation course in college, I heard again and again that we do not judge great art, that it judges us. That is the line of thinking I want us to take.

At the very center of this passage is the affirmation that "God is love." From there you can select any of several ways this love is expressed toward us and shown through us. For guidance I suggest three ways that we can interpret our lives in the light of God's love.

First, how much do we trust God's love? That's not a hard question. Yet it lies at the core of our relationship with God. Can we rest securely on God's love and not worry about our status with God or about what God might have in store for us? Too many persons, I fear, have anxiety about their relationship with God. They are afraid that God is angry with them over their sins or that God has a "will" for them that will make their lives miserable. They follow God grudgingly from a distance.

This passage calls us away from any uneasiness about God. It says that God's love is such that it reaches out to us wherever we are: "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" (v. 10). Can we not simply accept and enjoy that kind of love? Do we feel that there is a catch somewhere, that it appears too good to be true? Do we think God is setting us up in order to make some demand of us that we do not want? Why are we more inclined to trust ourselves and put off the love God offers?

Anne Lamott, in her book *Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith*, describes her conversion to Christianity. It is a story of the present, persistent love of Christ that gradually wore down her resistance. Anne Lamott says that after years of spiritual wandering and self-destructive behavior, she found herself attending a small Presbyterian church. "I went back to St. Andrew's about once a month. No one tried to con me into sitting down or staying. I always left before the sermon. I loved singing, even about Jesus, but I didn't want to be preached at about him." Her life at the time was a mess. She had guilt feelings following an abortion. Her best friend was dying of cancer. She was using drugs and alcohol. However, in the midst of her depression, she felt a constant and comforting presence. She thought of it as a cat watching her: "I felt him sitting there on his haunches in the corner of my sleeping loft, watching me with

patience and love, and I squinched my eyes shut, but that didn't help because that's not what I was seeing him with."

One Sunday Anne Lamott was sitting in a pew at St. Andrew's when the singing touched a chord deep within her. She writes: "I began to cry and left before the benediction, and I raced home and felt the little cat running along at my heels, and I walked down the dock past dozens of potted flowers, under a sky as blue as one of God's own dreams, and I opened the door of my houseboat, and I stood there for a minute, and I hung my head and said, 'Okay, I quit.' I took in a long deep breath and said out loud, "All right. You can come in." And the love of God through Christ flooded her heart.

Can you give yourself over to God's love in all situations and trust his presence and guidance? Does something hold you back? This passage asks that?

Second, how much do you love other persons? This question implies several things. It suggests that if God's love is in you, you will share it with others in your life, indeed with all persons. It also suggests that our confidence in our relationship with God is reflected in the way we treat and relate to other persons. "By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit."

Whenever anyone talks with me about how a person can know that he is a Christian and that everything is all right between him and God I turn to this First Letter of John. Over and over in its pages you find statements such as "by this you can know" and "in this way you can be assured," and the key is always connected with the way a person expresses the love he has learned from God. It's not always a comfortable test, but it is extremely effective. You become aware that as you share God's love you don't worry about how you stand in God's sight.

A third way this passage interprets us is the way it asks us about fear in our hearts. Do you live in fear? Hear this line again: “There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love” (v. 18).

One of the most helpful discoveries I ever made is the idea that we humans have but two emotions—love and fear. If you were asked the opposite of love, you would respond very quickly that the answer is hate. That’s not true. The opposite of love is fear. The writer of this letter understood that. When you think about it, it makes all the sense in the world. What causes a person to retreat into a defensive shell? It is the fear of being hurt. What makes us hold to prejudices? The fear that everyone else shares equality with us. What causes individuals and nations to resort to violence? The fear that others will take something that is ours.

A child is born with a need to love and to be loved and a need to trust and to be trusted. A growing child who receives love learns to trust. In time a person’s maturity can be measured by his capacity to trust. Our society does not encourage that. We are taught to seek to be “number one,” to work to have more than others so that we can show that we are successful, and to put other persons and groups down so that our position is not challenged. To make all this worse, we want to say that our blessings come from God who smiles on our way of life.

This kind of self-gratification grows out of fear. Love eliminates fear. It makes us one with the human race. And with God! The writer of this letter long ago understood that. “Love,” he said, “casts out fear.” I love the symbolism in the pronouncements of the angels in the stories of Jesus’ birth and resurrection. In the birth narrative angels said to the shepherd, “Fear not. I bring you tidings of a great joy.” When the women came to the tomb on Easter morning, angels said, “Fear not. He is not here.”

Repeatedly God comes to us telling us not to fear. God's love encourages us not to fear the future, not to fear pain and loss, not to fear our place with others, and not to fear God. Love and fear are incompatible.

How much do you trust? How much do you love other people? How much does fear dominate your life? This passage in First John eases into our hearts and works on our spirits. We do not interpret it. It interprets us.

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