

**WESTMINSTER**  
PRESBYTERIAN  
**CHURCH**



SERMON

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# **Beloved Is Where We Begin**

Dr. Jo Forrest



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We counted down the days by opening little windows on the Advent calendar. We marked the Sundays of hope, peace, joy, and love by lighting candles. We sang “Silent Night” as our final prayer on Christmas Eve.

Did you get what you waited for?

God gave us pure love in the form of a helpless baby. God told us to hold, him, take care of him, love him, and be loved by him. The Gospel of John proclaims the entire reason for Jesus in a single verse, “For God so loves the world, God gives his only son.”

Our culture tends to treat love as a noun and cloak it in sentimentality, limiting it to a private feeling. Our faith, instead, treats love as a verb. Love is what Jesus did and we are called to do...Love heals. Love hopes. Love forgives. Love advocates. Love serves. Love listens. Love speaks up. Loves feeds and clothes and visits and grieves and gives and prays.

At his death, God’s divine love raised Jesus and our baptism promises the same for you and me.

Today's reading comes from a letter written long after Jesus lived and died to a community of people wondering if the love that came down at Christmas evaporated.

*Dear God,*

*Even though the festive lights linger on the tree*

*The joy of Christmas begins to fade as we anticipate the grind of a new year.*

*Make this year different.*

*Settle us into the quiet of your sanctuary*

*and send your spirit among us so that as we hear your holy words, the truth of your love takes hold.*

*May we hear your echoes of "beloved" deep within us. Amen.*

### **1 John 4:7-16**

Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. <sup>8</sup>Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. <sup>9</sup>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. <sup>10</sup>In this is love, not that we loved God but that God loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. <sup>11</sup>Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another.

<sup>12</sup> No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us, and his love is perfected in us. <sup>13</sup> By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit. <sup>14</sup> And we have seen and do testify that the Father has sent his Son as the Savior of the world.

<sup>15</sup> God abides in those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God, and they abide in God. <sup>16</sup> So we have known and believe the love that God has for us.

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Despite all the schooling, most preachers have basically five sermons. I don't think it's really that many. It's usually just one – we are to preach love.

If we preach justice, it rises out of love for someone oppressed. When we preach grace, it flows from love's generosity. A call to serve...love.

Love brings us to show up. That's what God did in Jesus. Let's skip 30 years from his birth to his baptism. The moment Jesus rises from the waters of the Jordan the heavens open to shout "this is my son, the beloved."

When we receive the waters of baptism, we'd understand the impact more if loudspeakers thundered "beloved." Sure, we'd be startled, but maybe that's the point.

The belovedness God declares about Jesus in his baptism extends to us in our baptism. If we accept – truly accept – our belovedness, we can look at one another with loving eyes, seeing them as God's child as well, and live with this sacred gift.

Love is the bottom line for Christians. It's our guiding star, our path through the world, our alpha and omega, the measure of all our actions.

The Reverend Dr. Tim Hart-Anderson, who retired from Westminster Presbyterian in Minneapolis and who led reform within our denomination reminds us that as Presbyterian we are to read scripture with what we call "the rule of love."

We hold this rule of love alongside or preferably in front of our intellect and ego.

Anyone who says they believe scripture to be inerrant or infallible or who insists on a narrow translation of ancient

words tends to decide ahead of opening the Bible what they want it to mean. That makes it easy to soften Jesus' command to love neighbor, God, and self in favor of some certitude that feels good or justifies selfishness.

If we hold the *rule of love* as our interpretative guide, before we reach any conclusion about what a passage means, with the light of Christ, we ask: Does it reflect the love of God? If not, whatever we might think distorts the biblical intent.

Throughout our Reformed tradition – of reformed and being reformed by the word of God – this humility brings us closer to God's intent for our lives. And, the rule of love has been the catalyst for change in the church.

For example, a narrow reading from scripture justified enslaving human beings long ago. How could that reflect God's love for them and the rest of humanity? Separating us into some hierarchy for the benefit of a few. It took brave souls many decades to abolish enslavement, and we still have decades more of repair to do.

Certain passages kept woman from being ordained as officers. Then we asked, does God limit the capacity or withhold gifts

from God's children based solely upon gender? Thankfully, our denomination changed decades ago. But, we still have work to do in other sectors of our lives, particularly in our elected officials.

We excused discrimination against LGBTQ persons based on certain texts in scripture. We know better now. Both our reading and lived experience confirm that God loves all people.

Eventually the church –our denomination and others -- felt the need to grow beyond the old, limiting rules God never intended.

To state the obvious, the rule of love applies not only to scripture. It is the singular measure of how we, you and I, live.

Where the world might want to gauge our worth by how much power or money we have, or what position and privilege we have gained, or how successful we are in getting our way, or whether we are “winning” against those we consider “opponents” our baptism into the life of Jesus calls us to look at life from what we must imagine is God's point of view.

Living by the standard of love makes a difference. Love changes us, and it can transform the world.

The fourth chapter of the First letter of John makes it sound simple: “God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.”

For years and years, I began every wedding with this promise. Anyone who is listening might think the words describe the love of the couple, but these words from scripture convey much more than that.

First John says that when we show up to love – whether in a relationship with a partner, or with family, or with friends and even with strangers. *When we show up to love, we are on holy ground.* We are in the presence of God. When we love, we are living with, abiding with, God.

In case we miss the point, First John also says it in the negative: *Whoever does not love does not know God.*

No one thinks their way into religious conviction, or as First John writes, no one has ever seen God. But, everyone either knows love, or thirsts for love, or aspires to be loved. And,

that is how we come close to God. This inherent desire to be accepted just as we are...our aching to belong to something larger than ourselves and our yearning to be loved, all are expressions of our hunger for God.

And when those longings are satisfied – when we are accepted and valued for who we are, when we are welcomed fully into community, when we are loved – we have encountered God.

Today's reading is a window into heaven: to abide in love is to belong to God, and to belong to God is be loved by God.

As the church, we do not love in the abstract. We love one person at a time in what we do.

Sallie lived this each and every day. Sallie was a long-term member at a church I served, who died unexpectedly this fall. I still grieve for her family, the church, the entire community, and myself.

Any visitor who came through the doors, she'd find a way to say "hello," learn their name and enough about them to connect them with another member at church.

Basic hospitality? Yes, and so much more.

Sallie took to heart Jesus' command to love one another, love your neighbor, love your enemy, love God.

It didn't take long for all of us to see that before she knew their name she loved this other person – and that's what made the difference. No one needed to earn her respect. She never judged by appearances. It honestly didn't matter. She loved first.

She'd walk with them to coffee hour, and as appropriate invite them to consider a luncheon, or small group – she was the queen of small groups and grand potlucks.

She'd drop off covered dishes if someone were ill. Write notes to celebrate births or grieve deaths. She'd quietly help divorced parents get on their feet again. Drive someone to chemo.

She made it look easy. And, by example, she'd influence others to do the same.

Love God. Love neighbor. Life as a Christian begins this way.

In Jesus Christ, God teaches us that the goal of human life isn't simply to be ethically upright, politically powerful, or autonomous. Rather, it is to share in our belovedness by what we do.

We can be more patient, more tolerant of differences, imperfections. We can share in a grace that gives everyone a second chance, including ourselves. We can set down our desire to win the political and economic and social battles. And those who continue to grasp for power and privilege? They find their hands empty – both then and now.

For your own sake, and for the sake of those around you, hear God's word declared: belovedness. It's yours. And then go give it away.

Beloved is where you begin.





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