



WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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God Is Love

A Christian Worldview: Fourth of Seven in a Series

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Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. 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 (1 John 4:7-9).

One of the profoundest claims of the Christian faith is that the force, the power, the person behind all creation is love.

We said last time that God is a person, not in the anthropomorphic sense of a man or a woman sitting up above the clouds somewhere, but in the sense of a spiritual being who thinks and wills and creates, and is able to act with purpose in the world. Christianity claims that God is such a person, but more than that, God is a person who cares about all creation, even to the point of knowing and loving every one of us.

Science can explain lots of things in terms of natural laws that operate impersonally, and we've all benefitted enormously from the discoveries of science and the inventions of technology. But there are limits to what science can explain or show. Even in principle, it's hard to see how scientific methods could ever answer the question of whether there is any purpose or meaning to the universe. Science can't tell us whether there's a power behind this world that is not only intelligent but attentive to creation in general and humankind in particular. Science can't tell us, but Christianity can. And that's exactly what our faith

declares: that God exists, and God is a person, and God is love.

Obviously, believing this is a matter of faith. Some skeptics claim you should never believe anything that can't be demonstrated scientifically, but of course nobody really lives that way—not even the skeptics themselves.

Take love, for example. There's always an element of faith in love, isn't there, even among us human beings? Think of the people who love you. How do you know they love you? Did you do some scientific experiment to convince you? Probably not. No doubt you watch for signs that somebody cares about you, and you have an idea what would count as evidence, but there's always an element of faith or trust in love. In fact, people who set up tests to try to prove that somebody loves them turn out to be annoying, and they alienate the very people whose love they're desperate to believe in.

There's always an element of faith in love, because love is a choice, a matter of the will. Much of our human life depends on the notion that in some important sense we have a will that's free to choose. And free will means we can't know for certain what choices anyone will make—not even ourselves. There's always an element of trust in love, a belief that someone who claims to love us really does, since there's no way to prove it scientifically. That's why we talk about lovers being “faithful” to one another. Love is a matter of keeping faith with the people we love, being worthy of their trust. When a person violates that trust, we call it “infidelity,” from the Latin word for faith, which is *fides*. Infidelity is so painful because it's a breach of faith, a

violation of relationship that matters so much more to us than many of the factual kinds of information science has to offer.

To believe that God is love, and God loves us, is an act of faith, but that's partly because love is always a matter of faith. We can't see God, which adds another element of faith to our belief, but if we're willing to believe in God at all, believing that God loves us is not so very different from believing that anybody else loves us. Of course, we look for signs of love, and it's fair to ask whether there are any signs that God does in fact love us. The answer to that, I think, is absolutely yes.

Remember that we're talking about the kind of love that's called *agape* in the Greek New Testament. We've talked before about C. S. Lewis's description of four kinds of love, each with its own name in Greek. *Agape* does not depend on the attractiveness of the beloved, as in *eros*; or how adorable somebody is, as in *storge*, the affection we feel for pets and little children; or the reciprocity of friendship, as in *philia*, or "brotherly love." *Agape* is a love that has nothing to do with the qualities of the beloved, but everything to do with the character of the one who loves.

Think about the kinds of things this *agape* does. Above all, it cares for the beloved, and does whatever it can to see that she is well. So God calls us into being in the first place. None of us would be here unless God ultimately created us, and the motive behind all creation is nothing short of the love of God. God provides the things we need to live—the natural resources of our planet, but also the energy and intelligence and imagination to use those resources for

our well-being. God makes the world beautiful, and plants in our souls a capacity to delight in beauty. God knows the joy of creating things, and gives us the gift of creativity so we can know that joy as well. God gives us people to love, and be loved by, because love is generous and wants to share the deep joy that only love can bring. And God listens to us, and hears our prayers, and many of us can testify that God often answers prayers in ways that remind us of how God cares.

All these things God does for us because God is love. Last week we talked briefly about the problem of suffering, since that's one of the main reasons many people question whether there really is a God who loves us. There's more to say about that another time, but for the moment we noted that God in Christ is no stranger to suffering. Inasmuch as Christ suffers upon the cross, and he himself is the second person of the Trinity, there are deep signs that even in the midst of our pain God loves us, and God understands, and God has a plan to overcome suffering and death in the end.

In the meantime, *agape* is a love that will not let us go, as the old hymn says. We can't lose it by becoming less attractive or by not being good enough, because *agape* doesn't depend on any quality in us at all, but only on the devotion of the one who loves.

We can never lose God's love, and the love of God we know in Christ shows us how to love one another. "Everyone who loves is born of God and knows God," John's letter says. How is that? Because if God is love, then whoever loves other people in the way God loves us already reveals the image of God shining through. On the other

hand, John says, whoever does not love in this way does not really know God.

This last word comes as a challenge to all of us. It says that faith in God is not just a matter of claiming to believe certain things, or even, as they say in some Christian circles, just “accepting Jesus Christ as your personal Lord and Savior,” though of course that’s something we Christians should do. Rather, as Jesus says in several ways, true faith in God is shown by our love for God and other people. Or as the letter of James puts it succinctly, faith without works is dead.

So faith in God is not primarily about feelings either. Some Christians seem to think that faith is largely a matter of conjuring up certain feelings, such that, if they don’t feel any warm glow from the presence of God, they wonder where God is, or whether they don’t really trust in God after all. On the other hand, some people imagine that if they have feelings of sympathy for others who struggle, that counts as love—as if a few fleeting feelings were good enough, and they didn’t actually have to do anything about other people’s needs.

But the love God has for us, and expects us to have for others, is hardly about feelings at all. Feelings are a faulty guide to God’s love, and they can serve as a cheap substitute for the love God wants us to show other people. The kind of love we’re talking about here is active, and it motivates us to do all sorts of things.

First, the love of God moves and enables us to trust in God. God not only loves us, but gives us grace to love God

back. We love because he first loved us, as John says, and part of loving God is trusting God. We trust that God is present with us, as close as the air we breathe, even when we cannot feel God's presence.

Trusting God also creates a space where we can see ourselves clearly, without illusions, and let God work to redeem whatever is wrong within us. Thomas Keating, in his little book on centering prayer, says,

One's capacity to face the dark side of one's personality increases in direct proportion as one's trust in God develops, and even more when one experiences oneself as loved by God. All the defenses disintegrate in the presence of knowing one is loved by God.¹

Our faith shows us that love is not about judgment and condemnation, but about grace and forgiveness and healing and renewal, for ourselves and for others. When we know God's love we don't need to fear the day of judgment, because, as John says again, there is no fear in love, and perfect love casts out fear.

Love also means that we go lightly in our judgements about other people. There's a perennial tension for religious folk, and anyone else with strong moral sensibilities, which is that the more we care about doing what's right, the more tempted we are to judge other people who seem not to care about such things. Sometimes we just misread their intentions, and sometimes, truth be told, they really don't

¹ Thomas Keating, *Intimacy with God: An Introduction to Centering Prayer* (New York, Crossroad, 2009), 87.

care very much. But Christians need to rein in the impulse to righteous indignation. We know that no one has more grounds to judge and condemn than God has, and yet what we find in God is not condemnation, but grace and mercy and forgiveness for all the ways we fall short.

Those who say “I love God,” and hate their brothers and sisters, are liars, John says, putting a rather fine point on the matter. Hatred or any other kind of enmity in the name of God is one of those twisted ironies that Jesus came to save us from.

As the end of his time on earth drew near, Jesus saw what was coming and knew what he had to do. He said, “Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say—“Father, save me from this hour?” No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name.” Jesus came not to condemn us, but to save us, because that’s what love does. No matter whether our sins are mostly sins of indifference, failing to care about other people as we should, or sins of strong but intolerant commitment—either way, Christ comes to save, and reconcile us to God.

So Jesus says, “And I, when I am lifted up, will draw all people to myself.” Athanasius, an early church father, said it was fitting that Christ should die upon a cross, because only on a cross does a man die with his arms outstretched. And there we have the greatest symbol of all for the breadth and depth of God’s love: Christ on the cross with his arms outstretched, inviting everyone to come to him, and see the wondrous love of God, and learn to live in the light of that love.

The marvelous Italian poet Dante thought that all of creation was one great gift of love from God. In his *Divine Comedy*, Dante wrote at length of hell, and then of purgatory, but his magnificent poem ends in paradise, and the very last words recall “the love that moves the sun and all the other stars.” As Dante knew, creation itself is a work of the God who loves us, and we who are made in God’s image are meant to share in God’s works of love.



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