

God is Love
1 John 4:7-8, 17-21
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My beloved friends, let us continue to love each other since love comes from God. Everyone who loves is born of God and experiences a relationship with God. The person who refuses to love doesn't know the first thing about God, because God is love—so you can't know God if you don't love. God is love. When we take up permanent residence in a life of love, we live in God and God lives in us. This way, love has the run of the house, becomes at home and mature in us, so that we're free of worry on Judgment Day—our standing in the world is identical with Christ's. There is no room in love for fear. Well-formed love banishes fear. Since fear is crippling, a fearful life—fear of death, fear of judgment—is one not yet fully formed in love. We, though, are going to love—love and be loved. First we were loved, now we love. God loved us first. If anyone boasts, "I love God," and goes right on hating their sibling, thinking nothing of it, they are a liar. If they won't love the person they can see, how can they love the God they can't see? The command we have from Christ is blunt: Loving God includes loving people. You've got to love both.

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There are Bible verses or ideas, for all of us, that are essential, that shape how we understand everything else. This passage is that for me. God is love. Period. There's no condition, interpretation, or limitation. It's not God is this kind of love but not that; or God is love for these people but not those; or God is love if you do x, y, z or believe 1, 2, 3. Just, God is love.

It's a profound claim. There are very few places in the Bible where the substance of God is directly declared. The only other one I'm aware of is God is light. There are claims about Jesus. There are descriptions of God, adjectives and verbs—God is merciful and mighty, glorious and gracious. But the community of John steps out with pretty astonishing chutzpah: God is love.

We can only know God through love.

Which begs the question: what is love? bell hooks, a Black Appalachian author and theorist, borrows from Erich Fromm, a psychologist, and defines love as "the will to extend one's self for the purpose of nurturing one's own or another's spiritual growth..." Love is an act of will — namely, both an intention and an action."

It's not a warm, fuzzy feeling. It's not a feeling at all. It is an action on behalf of someone's well-being. This claim—that God's very being is love—is a powerful litmus test for whether something is Christian or not, holy or not. If it's not loving, it's not of God. This is the lens through which, I believe, we should understand all of scripture, which should shape our values and ethics. If love does not abide, God does not abide.

bell hooks goes on to say, "love and abuse cannot coexist." In other words, the diminishment or degradation of another person cannot be love. Whether it's hidden abuse within a family, or casual disregard for a neighbor in need, or caring more for property values than housing for others, or warehousing people in a brutal prison system, or allowing people to be starved, shot, and bombed without speaking a word in protest, from the smallest moments of our days, to the very structure of our society, our economy, our foreign policy—if it's not loving—seeking the

well-being of the other person, then it is not of God. And when we act that way, we are entirely estranged from God.

Saying God is love is not some feel-good, I'm okay—you're okay, weak and watered down theology. It is as demanding as it gets.

There's a difference in the Greek in how the word love is used in 1 John when it relates to God and when it relates to people. In the Greek, love is a noun when it relates to God. God is love. The essence of God, and the essence of love are the same.

But, with people, in 1 John, it's a verb. People *do* love. It's never a feeling or attribute. It's an action, a verb. Love is always something we do. When we love, we abide in God. Whoever loves knows God. Whenever we love, we are in God.

Think about the most recent loving thing you did, the most recent thing you did for someone else's well-being—whatever it was: scooting over to make space for someone in your pew, saying hello to someone you hadn't met before, maybe it was getting someone else dressed this morning, or texting a friend to see how they're doing. Think about whatever it might have been—the last time you extended yourself on behalf of someone else.

That, right then, was God. Because God is love. If you have trouble with an anthropomorphic old man in the sky image of God, I find this to be really helpful. God's not some kind of superhero in the sky. God is love.

So if we want to connect with the very heart of reality, then we have to connect with one another.

It's hard, though. It's hard to love and see God in that love because people are frustrating. And the business of loving mostly doesn't feel very holy. I mean, it does occasionally. The early days of romantic love often feel transcendent. There are moments in a friendship that feel divine. Even love on a social scale when we're working for justice can feel holy. There are moments of loving other people where it's crystal clear that we're abiding in God, hidden in the heart of Christ, resting in the Divine.

But then there are the other moments. You know: the boring ones—laundry, and bills, and listening to the long boring story for the 100th time. Love is daily, bodily tasks—wiping bottoms, cleaning the bathtub, getting food on the table. It's hanging in there through the fight, refusing to give up on the relationship or community. It's choosing our words carefully, and being held to account, and saying I'm sorry. It's advocating for laws and policies and systems that lead to the well-being of other people. All of this—this frustrating, mundane, repetitive, hard work is love. It is God. Because God is love.

My friend Ann says we get as much God as we want. The wider we let our hearts break open, the more God we receive. The deeper we sink into the doing of love, leaving all the rest aside, then the more we see and know of God. Because God is love, and when we love each other, we abide in God and God in us.