

1 John 4:7-21

It's so easy to love the lovely

Well, it really is beginning to look a lot like Christmas now. And our advent waiting is almost over. The preparations are coming together and this time next week our celebrating will be in full swing – the giving and receiving of gifts, the joy around the table, the abundance of good food, the company of family and friends. It all sounds so wonderful, almost too good to be true. Over the past few weeks we have been encouraging you to turn Christmas upside down and inside out, not just this year but every year. It's a catchy slogan but we want it to be so much more than just another little catch phrase. We want it to impact the way you celebrate Christmas: that you not just “keep Christ in Christmas” but that you stay focused amid all the holiday clutter and chaos and that you keep your worship of Christ front and centre, to spend less money on buying stuff and spend more of yourself in giving your time and attention to others, and to dedicate a portion of the monies you saved from needless spending to help where it is really needed. And finally, today, just one more small thing, just a little thing really: Love all. Love all.

It might seem like a little thing at first glance. Or maybe we reduce it to a small thing because it seems so impossibly huge. It sounds like a good idea. In fact, there couldn't be anything more quintessentially Christian sounding than “love all.” It sounds like the kind of thing a preacher would say and the congregation would nod their heads in agreement with. We are, after all, the ones with all of those verses about love: God so loved the world that he gave his only son, love is patient, love is kind, love the lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength and love your neighbor as yourself. We can repeat those verses and nod in agreement at the general principles but actually doing it? That's a bit trickier. Because we aren't just talking about the philosophy, the big idea of loving all. We are talking about the Biblical imperative to love; to love indiscriminately. What would it look like for you and I to love all?

I didn't know it right away– I bet you didn't know it right away either. I don't know why I haven't learned this by now. She parked her hummer, taking up two spaces, and blew in through the doors with her big fur coat trailing behind her. And after that, two boys, 10 and 3. And the drama with which she entered the building escalated from there. The 3 year old was wild and out of control. He tromped loudly around the sanctuary throughout the beginning of worship with the 10 year old running behind him, trying his very best to collect him back to his seat. All the while, she sat there doing nothing. When the children left the sanctuary, big brother took little brother to the nursery, while she sat there. I “welcomed” her. But when she began to spill her story and ask about what we could do to help her, I just shut down. I felt overwhelmed and when she demanded that the church should help with her son, my feathers were ruffled. And I know I'm not the only one she barked at. I saw lots of eye rolling and fluffing of ruffled feathers. In different corners we were talking under our breath and behind closed doors. And so, when I regained my composure, I was thinking to myself “Oh, I know God. I

know what's going on here. This is going to be one of those "Jesus in disguise" stories." And, I will be completely transparent, I kind of resented it. I didn't want that disruption at our nice little church. I didn't want to have to pour more time and energy into creating space for her. Yeah, yeah, yeah, God I know. I know how this works. You want me to help her, to care, you want me to look into that face, and sooner or later, the light bulb will go off and I will get it. Well, I do get it." But the truth is, I'm not going to pretend to like it, or that its always easy or fun or exciting. This just isn't one of those moments where all of a sudden the choir of angels begins to sing and I see the twinkle in her eye and star dust falls from above and she is transformed into a sweet soul. Of course, she was not transformed at all. But something in me was. Not right away because I am stubborn like that. I'll admit that I was frustrated and annoyed and breathed a sigh of relief when she drove her hummer down the driveway but I sometime later I began to think about what it means to love all. Surely, she is what it means. Love all.

Of course, this challenges our shallow and silly notions of what love is. If you believe the steady stream of ads at this time of year, love is a commodity that comes with a price tag. "Get her a gift she will love" or "they will love you for it". That's why so many of us spend ourselves into debt each year – desperately trying to give a gift they will love rather than just simply giving love itself. Love is not on sale in a pre-boxing week blowout. Nor is love that warm and fuzzy feeling we sometimes get and wish we could hold onto forever. Sometimes love is hard. Often, it is hard. Probably it is hard because it is not our first instinct – our first instinct is survival. That's what Adam and Eve chose in the garden: survival rather than love. Love is not our idea. We didn't invent it. We can't manufacture it. Love comes from outside of us. It comes from God. John in his first letter, writes about love. In chapter 4, which we read from this morning, in the fourteen verses from verse 7-21, the word love is used 29 times. Clearly, John is trying to tell us about love. He is trying to tell us about the love God has for us and because of that great love we should love one another. He says it over and over again. Because God loves us – because God has loved you – you should love others. He ends chapter 4 with these words: The command we have from Christ is blunt: Loving God includes loving people. You've got to love both. It is easy for us, in the church, to look outside these walls and critique the shallow understanding of love: the love of things, the love of money, the love of self. It is easy for us to look outside these walls and critique – it is harder for us to look at ourselves and ask the tough question: are we any different? Maybe we know that God loves us, that Jesus loves me as we love to sing. That's easy enough to hear and understand because its all about us. But what about the other part of the equation? Here we are talking about loving God as if any of us really know how. But here's what John is telling us: if we are ever to figure out how to love him, we have to figure out how to love one another. The gospel – the good news is not just about us being so loved by God. It is also about us showing that same love to others. And that wouldn't even maybe seem so hard, at least at first glance, love one another. That wouldn't be so hard if we just had to love the lovely. Its so easy to love the lovely. In fact, it takes no effort at all because we are fueled by the love that radiates from them. We want to spend time with them, we want to drink in the love they exude. But where did we ever get the idea that

love is only true if it is easy? If it makes us feel good? Too many Hollywood movies and romance novels. Because it certainly isn't biblical. Love – true love is hard. It requires our submission. Those verses from 1 Corinthians 13 that the apostle Paul wrote that every bride wants to have on her wedding day because they sound so poetic and beautiful? I'd encourage you to read those again: these aren't fluffy words – they are instructions for you, not your spouse or your child or your siblings. These are words for love at work, for persevering when loving is difficult. Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres." Love is hard work. It is not soft and cuddly and cozy and makes you feel good like a hallmark movie or a West Jet Christmas commercial. Those are sentimentality. And in a surprising twist, that's what we, the church, have done with the story of that night in Bethlehem. It is difficult for us to picture the manger scene now without the sentimentality which often accompanies it. It is hard for us imagine what the real scene might have looked like – we are so fond of seeing our darling children acting like angels for a few moments. Sheep soft and fluffy with their pristine white cotton balls, Mary wearing blue velvet, her face illumined by a soft light. In those nativity plays it is hard for us to get our heads around that strange blend of ordinary people, their names so familiar to us now. Elizabeth and Zechariah – old and barren, whispered about behind their backs because God had not blessed them with a child, Mary who brought shame upon her family with an unplanned pregnancy, Joseph who felt the stares and heard what they were saying about Mary, about him, the shepherds – existing on the very fringes, the magi – foreigners. Love came down at Christmas for these – for the ones people pointed at, turned their backs on, talked about, rejected. What about the family tree Matthew includes in chapter 1 of his gospel? Maybe we think he began that way to make a big impression right off the top; to let everyone know just how fine a family Jesus had come from, how impeccable his pedigree. These days we skip right over the family tree of Jesus recorded in Matthew 1. For most of us, these are just names to us - like the guest list to an exclusive party – all the celebs in one place – properly vetted to be sure to keep out the riff raff. But if you read that list you will find all kinds of characters, perhaps a few you might be surprised about. Even there, on that pedigree, you will find what many would consider the unlovely. Every family has them – even Jesus. Then again, Jesus himself was considered unlovely. Beaten and whipped and spat on; hung on a tree between two criminals. Real love is gritty. It is going where you don't want to be and it is staying there long past comfortable. Real love is messy and unpredictable. It is faithfulness in the middle of chaos and sadness and the worst kind of surprises and unmet expectations and it is not giving up. Sometimes love hurts; sometimes it hurts to the point of heartbreak. And it keeps on loving. That's love. That's the point of the love come down at Christmas – the love of a God who loves and keeps on loving no matter what, a God who would come to us as a baby – vulnerable and in need of love just to survive, Jesus who would literally love us to death; the gift of love that would sacrifice for others. Sacrifice not just for the lovely – for the well dressed, well mannered, well educated, the well paid born on the right side of the tracks or the right side of the world. But love for all. Love

for the unlovely, the undeserving, the strange and the despised, and the demanding and ungrateful. As I read that list I think about a secret we have at our house. Often Kirk will say or do something, and people will look at me and say “How do you stay with him? How have you managed to put up with him all these years?” And we look at each other and smile and laugh. We smile and laugh because Kirk and I both know that its really the other way around – of the two of us, I’m the difficult one to live with. Difficult and demanding and ungrateful. And there I was. I knew it was going to be a Jesus in disguise opportunity – I saw him. And because I did, I didn’t give her a piece of my mind about her lack of parenting skills, as if my own are so stellar. Because I saw him, I served her. And I know, many of you served her also. But did I love her? No. I served her out of a sense of duty and obligation rather than loving her out of response to the gift of love Christ has given to me. Love all, like give more, comes not from within us but only in response to Jesus. It is not related to guilt –like, oh great, if I really want to be a Christian now they are telling me that I have to give more money and love everyone. Guilt, obligation will never be able to produce compassion. It only produces bitterness or self-pride. But remember compassion – to suffer with. Compassion, our ability to give more and love all comes only from a heart brimming with thanksgiving. Because we remember that we were once in need, that we were once unlovely. And it was then that Christ loved us, that he gave himself to us, that gift of love come down. We remember, don’t we? Did I love her, no. Still by grace, I see it now. Now I understand why John said it over and over and over again in his letter to us – because he knew that we would forget. Still by grace, God will give me, will give us other opportunities to love and be loved. Those opportunities are all around us: they are in this room, they are outside those doors, they are across the street at Walmart, they are living in condos on Bay Street, they are living on reserve in northern Ontario, they are a world away in Aleppo. They are here in Georgina. Jesus is here. Pray that God will open our eyes and give us courage to love all.

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