

First, a word about love. This first letter of John goes a little overboard (some might say) – trying too hard to make a simple point. The word love in this translation occurs 30 times in all of 1 John – and HALF of those occurrences are within the portion of the letter that is today's lesson. Not to mention beloved (2 of six occurrences) loved (4 of 8). Could the author have been clearer? God = love.

The 'love' we are called to – the love in which we are urged to abide – is *agape*: the love of hospitality and collective encouragement. The love that shares and cares – the love that seeks the best for the object of that love. Agape is the love that, in Paul's words (1 Cor 13) "...bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things." And, in case you hadn't heard, loving like that is hard.

We long to be a people who faithfully follow Jesus. And Jesus is the epitome of the deep abiding love of God. His demonstrations of compassion – his choice of disciples – his miracles and general attitude towards those in need in the gospels (and beyond) reveals one who abides in the love of God. Even those who oppose him are treated with decency.

And that is what make the difference; that is what makes our discipleship so difficult. The deep abiding love of God demands the very best of us – all the time.

With great determination we can manage, most of the time, to act according to an attitude of love. Charity work of all kinds testifies to that. We know how to act towards those who are struggling – those who are lost – those 'less fortunate' (to use an unfortunate phrase...) but what about the rest of the time?

What about now?

We are mired in a global health crisis that is entering it's second year –refugees continue to struggle and suffer –political divides are sharpened and intolerant groups and individuals demand tolerance from the rest of society – how in the name of love do we live out this call to abide in the love of God?

The struggle to live according to Jesus' invitation – the challenge of abiding in the love of God – is more pronounced these days. We want permission to hold a grudge. We are overcome with the impulse to hate those who disagree with us – whatever the argument might be. Church against state; right against left; community care against individual rights; traditional thinking against progressive ideas – any one of these situations would test our resolve, and it seems we are being asked to pick a side in Every. Single. One.

1 John seems too simple for our complicated world. 'Beloved, let us love one another...' how do we put our hurt and our pride aside? What is the secret? Show us the miracle that will sweep those differences away and leave us only our mutual 'belovedness.'

The author of this brief letter has no miracle to offer, just a compelling statement about the relationship between love and fear.

It seems to come out of nowhere. “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.” Out of what seems like a riddle with no solution, this statement might help us understand, not just our own reluctance to love, but the attitudes of those whom we find least loveable.

Think of the heartbreaking, soul-crushing conversations you’ve had about political differences, theological differences, and lately the lopsided discussions about public health policy that are making front page news; all of these topics are loaded with fear – on either side. Fear of losing ground or losing face – losing power or losing a long-established understanding that is no longer accurate – fear can make us do unspeakable things. Fear closes down conversations. Fear clings to broken dreams and outdated ideas. Fear has brought down governments, shattered families and brought about the untimely deaths of countless thousands.

But imagine what love might do.

Love – agape – in the face of certain death saved tens of thousands of Jews from destruction during world war two. Love opens the hearts and homes of Canadians to refugees from Vietnam, Syria, Central Africa. Love drove certain determined folks to demand the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and love persuades us to act on the recommendations even now. Love – inclusive, expansive agape – demands that the church consider how harmful our attitudes toward faithful followers of Jesus from the LGBTQ community have been. Love requires that we make amends and change our thinking.

If we abide in love, God abides in us and we in God. Even as the argument seems to spiral into itself, we ought to recognize that the author of 1 John is describing a relationship of mutual support. God lifts us up, we honour God by loving one another...God’s love can spread faster than any virus – This deep, abiding love provides more certain protection from fear than any vaccine. This love doesn’t place us above the ordinary problems of the world; it lets us work through them.

So, love wears a mask – even when challenged by those who fear the (so-called) loss of their freedom. And love gets vaccinated – for the sake of those who believe it will help AND for the sake of those who don’t trust the process. Love offers genuine apology and love is willing to be taught something new. Love looks past appearance or convention. Love helps find joy when joy seems absent, and love recognizes that our similarities are more important than our differences.

This love is not absent, just well hidden. But when we think of Jesus – when we look to Jesus – we see that love in all it’s radiant glory. It is that glorious, generous, fearless love – the love of Christ – that is ours to know and ours to share. Look to the world in love, dear friends, and see what wonders will be revealed.