

Foothills Congregational Church
United church of Christ
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God is Love – More Than a Cliché

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1 John 4:7-21

When did I know I was called to be a preacher? I grew up in a non-religious family. I remember attending church one time with my cousin when I was about five. I struggled through Sunday school that morning and I remember thinking, “*Hey wait a minute— it’s Sunday and there’s not supposed to be school on Sunday.*”

And during that same Sunday, I recall holding the *hymnal upside down* and a kind adult standing next to me turning it right-side up and pointing to the line everyone was singing. After that awkward Sunday, it’s amazing that I ever went back to church.

Back to church I did go, but not again until I was age 17 though. I went to church again with a high school friend. Mario, my friend, had just turned 18 and he was afraid that he might be drafted.

It was in the early 1990s, on the onset of the first gulf war in Iraq. Mario was afraid that he might be drafted and he figured that he needed some religion— we were young and uncertain about the way the world and times of war worked.

At that same time, I was barely staying in high school. I moved out of my father’s care when I was in high school. My friend Mario went to church to find God and religion— and I went along with him to church for the free food fellowships.

But, as a surprise to me, I did bump into God in that small Baptist church (Williams Road Baptist, Ft. Worth, TX). It was the love, care and support of the people in that small church that kept me interested in the thought that there might be something helpful in religion and spirituality. Prior to this, the only religious designation that I or my family claimed was agnosticism.

A year or so after going to church on a regular basis—I started off attending church and being one of the custodians of the church (cleaning bathrooms, vacuuming and trash detail), and then I started to pray about my future (what was I going to be when I “grew up”).

I was nearing the end of high school and had not really planned on attending college. No one in my immediate family had graduated high school. I was the first of my extended family to attend and graduate college.

When I first told my mom that I felt called to ministry, she exclaimed, “Oh, no! I’ll never have grandchildren.” I had to explain to her that I was not going to be a priest.

When I told my dad that I was going into ministry work, he just shook his head and asked how I was going to make a living. In time, they both supported my pursuit of faith even if it was uncharted terrain for them as well.

What was it about God and faith that spoke to me? I was young and alone— I felt so alone. Up to that point in my life, I was not making wise choices. I thought if there was a God, that having that sort of a purpose and connection in my life could not be any worse than the trouble I was finding on my own accord.

I also believed in love. More than romantic love or familial love— I believed early on that God was loving. I hoped in love, and I was willing to wager that God was love.

I remember where I was the first time I read 1 John. I was at my friend Chad's house. In chapter 4: 7-21, I these 15 verses of the periscope, love and variations of love, is used some 28 times!

It's clear that the author, and the community of John, believed that *agape love* was God's essential nature. The theological construct of "God is Love" is as paradoxically simple as it is profound. The first challenge of the theological construct, God is love, to discern what more is God, other than love. Can a human mind even comprehend the notion of "God"?

There is a parable found in Buddhist, Hindu and Jainism texts that tell of a group of blind persons that are tasked with defining what an elephant is (having never know what an elephant was before):

"A group of blind [persons] heard that a strange animal, called an elephant, had been brought to the town, but none of them were aware of its shape and form. Out of curiosity, they said: "We must inspect and know it by touch, of which we are capable". So, they sought it out, and when they found it they groped about it. In the case of the first person, whose hand landed on the trunk, said "This being is like a thick snake". For another one whose hand reached its ear, it seemed like a kind of fan. As for another person, whose hand was upon its leg, said, the elephant is a pillar like a tree-trunk. The blind man who placed his hand upon its side said, "elephant is a wall". Another who felt its tail, described it as a rope. The last felt its tusk, stating the elephant is that which is hard, smooth and [sharp] like a spear."

Discerning what and who God is, is like the story of those blind persons bumping into and encountering an elephant for the first time. I too often feel like I'm bumping into God and forever not knowing or fully appreciating the great depth and mystery of my encountering of the divine.

Is God a being? Non-being? An entity? Pure energy? Personable? Transcendent? Immanent?
Is God pantheistic? Panentheistic?
Is God an open theist's theology? A Process theist's notion? A Radical theist's deconstruction?
Is God kind and benevolent or indifferent, and unaffected by the world and universe of worlds out there?

These are theological queries that occupy, entertain and distract our thoughts about God.

But the author of 1 John, and that community of early Christians some 40+ years after the crucifixion of Jesus, boiled down the essence of their faith in hope that God is love. Followers of Jesus at that time were greatly exposed; their faith in Jesus at the time in history was a risky

proposition and they were not welcomed in all spaces of their communities or overseeing principalities. They felt vulnerable and fearful.

The conviction that God was love was meant to give the Christian community confidence and sense of boldness— because, “*perfect love casts out fear.*” Not that the Christians in that community were perfect, but that God as love was whom they were rooted in (abiding in) and that God as love displaces fear.

Paul said this was in Romans 8:

“35 Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? . . . 37 No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. 38 For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, 39 nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

The author of 1 John explains that *fear has to do with punishment*, but God is love, and that love will never cast us away.

It’s hard to not be fearful. It’s hard not to become overrun by phobias and anxieties.

Dwelling in God as love (abiding) becomes apparent in our lives when we love others. In fact, the scripture suggests that, as we open our lives up to loving and caring for others, in the way similar to what Jesus taught and demonstrated in his own actions, is experience the love of God alive and active in our lives.

Selfless and kind love is the medium and mode where we learn to know and experience God.

As a ‘United Church of Christ’ church we do not have a creed or doctrine that we dogmatically adhere to; rather, we encourage “*testimonies of faith and not tests of faith*”; that is, we encourage would be followers to walk in the light of the divine that they know-- as long as it is light that radiates life in loving and caring ways toward others. The love that the community of John was encouraging us toward was a lifestyle of altruistic love (love and charity a way of life.)

Our faith is not a list of doctrinal propositions stacked in systematic layers of nuance, rather, our faith is one of humble experience-- one of bumping into love and learning to love others even as we too are loved. This sort of concern-- a desire for a more open, inclusive, and non-fundamentalist welcome was of great importance to the founding of Foothills Congregational Church, UCC, back in 1960, and this mission of abundant and generous welcome continues to be a central part of our identity.

But, beware, God as love unfolding and moving in our lives will stretch your imaginations, faith, and social affirmation of others different than ourselves.

And the scripture unit (1 John 4:7-21) concludes thusly,

“We love because he first loved us. Those who say, ‘I love God’, and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.”

We can add more specific applications to the concluding verse as well:

Agape love for our Muslim brothers and sisters...

Selfless love (the way we would want to positively affirmed) for our LGBTQ+ sisters and brothers...

Compassionate love for our brothers and sisters of opposite political persuasion...

Amen.