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WATER FOR THE SOUL
1 John 4:7-9

This week our society will observe Valentine's Day, a celebration of love. That can be problematic. A girl says to a guy, "I'm sorry, but I can't be your Valentine for medical reasons." The guy says, "Oh no, what's the problem?" She says, "You make me sick." I think I may have had that conversation once when I was young. Do you know why you shouldn't fall in love with a pastry chef? Because they'll dessert you.

Love is a big issue for every human being. The 20th century politician Frank Clark said, "A baby is born with a need to be loved, and never outgrows it." Amentine Dupin was a 19th century French novelist who wrote under the pseudonym George Sand. She said, "There is only one happiness in this life, to love and be loved." Her life was something of a train wreck search for love, often in all the wrong places.

We all know we long to be loved. We are those babies who were born with a huge need for love and have never outgrown it. We feel most alive and energized when we are loving someone, and we feel happiest when we are being loved. Those of us who are followers of Jesus also know the central importance of love to the life we are called to live. Jesus told his disciples the way the world would know that they were truly following him is that they would love each other. Perhaps the greatest description of how love behaves is 1 Corinthians 13. Paul began that chapter by saying that no matter what we do, if we do it without love, it is empty. He said we could even do mind exploding miraculous things or carry out deeds of unimaginable self-sacrifice, but if we do it without love, it means nothing.

There are people in our society who insist our concepts of love are nothing more than the result of chemical reactions and electrical impulses in our brains. But they don't live that way. As much as they may insist on the idea that we are nothing but matter, they still crave love and long to love as well.

Everyone knows that love is crucial to life, everyone knows they are desperate for love, but despite all that there is a deficit of love in our world. The need for love vastly outstrips the supply of it. The world unfortunately is a remarkably unloving place. Most humans feel like they are not loved nearly as much as they wish they were, and human relations display a tragic paucity of love in general.

At Valentine's the emphasis is typically on romantic love. But I like to think of love as being similar to water in a way. We have water that comes out of our tap that we use to wash dishes, wash clothes, brush our teeth and even take showers in. We have water that we spray on our grass and plants to keep them alive. We use water to wash our car. There is water in the juice, the tea and the coffee we drink. We use water for cooking purposes. We have a humidifier in our bedroom that we sometimes use when the humidity is really low. It sprays out a mist you mostly can't see, but that mist is water. In the summer we put ice cubes in our lemonade, and those cubes are water. My point is that there is this stuff that shows up in a variety of ways, in all kinds of places, has different forms and is employed for myriads of uses, but it is all the same stuff. It is all H₂O. Love is a bit like that. It has different forms, it can be found in a wide variety of relationships and has different uses, but it is all the same stuff. The same principles of love that make friendships work also make a marriage and a family work. And just as water is absolutely necessary for physical life, so love is absolutely necessary for emotional life. You cannot be physically healthy and alive without water and you cannot be emotionally healthy and alive without love.

So the souls of all humans, us included are desperate for love, but there isn't enough to go around. Clearly our world needs more love, but that's not a secret. Everyone knows about it. But part of the problem here is there is a lot of misunderstanding of exactly what love is, and even more about how we can have more of it. Fortunately God has quite a bit to say about love. Let's consider what he has to say about it and how we can do our part to lessen the deficit of love that exists in this world. Let's look at 1 John 4:7-9.

GOD IS THE EPITOME OF LOVE

John issued the challenge in verse 7 to love one another. "Dear friends, let us love one another." Right, that's what we're talking about. Let's all love each other. Please note there are no restrictions or limitations on that command. John did not say we should love one another some of the time, or most of the time. He did not say we should love some people but not others. He did not say we should love one another as long as we are lovable. He did not excuse us from loving others when they are unkind or downright incorrigible. Just a blanket, "love one another." No matter what the situation, no matter what the person is like, no matter the provocation to the contrary, we are supposed to love everyone all of the time without exception. End of story. Nice idea, but the problem I've already mentioned is that seems to be easier said than done. Pretty consistently everywhere you look in this world you will see people failing to love each other. The problems of human relations boil down to a failure to love, and it is pervasive among us.

Somehow we seem to have the ability to heartily endorse the idea of love, then fail to love while simultaneously thinking we are loving. We apparently have difficulty understanding what love actually is and then employing it in all our relations. In fact, much of what passes for love actually is selfishness in disguise. There is a plethora of ideas about love, but John reveals in these verses the infallible definition of love. He tells us what love actually is. He says God is love.

Wait, the Bible claims that God is a person. Love isn't a person. It's a concept, a thing. Understand that John was writing metaphorically. We use the kind of expression he employed here. I once heard a person describe a great guy by saying, "He is kindness itself." That was a metaphor. The person didn't mean that guy was a concept and not a real person. He meant he was the embodiment of what it means to be kind. If you want to know what kindness is just watch that man and you'll see it. He meant there is no better way to explain what kindness looks like than to point to that man. And that's what John meant. God is the embodiment of love. There is no better way to explain what love is than to look at him. Watch him and you will see what it means to love. He defines what love actually is by his character and actions. So what do we see when we watch God? We could spend eternity describing the character of God, but today I want to zero in on four aspects of God's love. With each of these qualities you could substitute the word "love" for God and it will be true.

God is personal

We know that John 3:16 says that God "so loved the world." Well the world is really big. There are 7 billion people on the planet. Does God love them en masse? If he looks at that huge mass of humanity I just disappear in it because I'm too small to notice. What about me? Does God love me?

The Scripture says he does love all of them, but he is a person who relates to and loves each individual person. Jesus said in Matthew 10:30 that God knows the number of hairs on your head. He didn't mean by that God knows the number of hairs on the average human head. He meant God knows how many hairs you have today. He knows you so well that he knows the tiniest detail of who you are. And he loves you.

Psalms 139:16 says, "your eyes saw my unformed body; all the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be." God knew each one of us before we were even us. He knows every aspect of us, and he loves us.

Galatians 2:20 is a familiar verse to many, but we often miss what it says at the end. “I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.” Paul wrote that Jesus Christ loved him and gave himself for him. Jesus died on the cross for him. Yes, God so loved the world, but he loved the individuals that make up the world. He loves us personally.

I find this remarkable. It is easier to say you love all people, than to actually love individuals, because they can be difficult. Think of that person that you have surely encountered in a meeting. The meeting should be over, everything has been covered, but there is a time for questions. This person starts asking questions that are totally unnecessary, maybe even inane. It drags the whole thing on interminably, but this person just keeps at it. Yeah, God loves that annoying person. Or there is the person who has to be right about everything and wants to make sure you know how right he or she is. That person is just hard to be around. Yeah, God loves that person. There is the person who incessantly talks about himself or herself. No matter what the topic of conversation is, somehow that person ends up making the conversation about them. Yeah, God even loves that person too.

In our extended family we had a funny event last year. A member of the family had to travel across a large part of the country on a 4 hour flight. She was bringing her dog, but didn’t want to put the dog in a crate down in the cargo hold. So she managed to get her dog certified as an emotional support dog making it possible to bring him on the plane with her. What could possibly go wrong with that plan? It turned out the dog didn’t like flying. I suspect he was offended because he had to travel in coach. It became an eventful and difficult trip for the dog’s owner. I was reminded of that when I saw the story a couple of weeks ago about the woman photographer in Newark who wanted to bring her “emotional support peacock” on a flight to LA with her. The airlines told her 3 times on the phone that the bird could not go on the plane, but she didn’t listen and showed up at the airport with it. The amazing truth is that God also loves that ridiculous woman.

God’s love for us is personal and individual. God knows you and me better than we even know ourselves and he loves us. He loves us as we are and he loves us so much Christ died for us. This is an important truth that has some implications we will see shortly.

God is good

The Bible says often that God is good. Psalm 136:1 says, “Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good. His love endures forever.” Almost that exact message shows up in Psalm 100:5 and 106:1. Psalm 34:8 says, “Taste and see that the Lord is good” In Exodus 34 Moses longed to see God as he is. He prayed that God would show him his glory. In verse 5 God told him, “I myself will make my goodness pass before you.” The way God could most reveal the truth about who he is was to let Moses get a glimpse of his goodness. Psalm 92:15 says, “The Lord is upright; he is my Rock, and there is no wickedness in him.” There is exactly zero evil in God. He is absolute, 100% pure good. 1 John 1:5 says, “God is light and in him there is no darkness at all.”

This is a big deal. Pastor Bob Deffinbaugh tells of conducting a seminar at a maximum security prison and meeting a man named Mo. Mo was immense and massively strong. He was possessed of raw physical power so great that he could do whatever he wanted because he intimidated even the hard men in that prison. Bob was told that Mo was going to sing something at the seminar. When he asked what Mo was going to sing they said, “Anything he wants.” Deffinbaugh points out that a man who has that much power is terrifying if he is evil, even a little bit. The good news is that Mo has become a follower of Jesus, so he does not use his power for evil. Think of how powerful God is. If there was even a little bit of evil in him he would be terrifying. But there isn’t. There is only good.

Given that truth, what happens when he relates to people? He seeks to do good to them. Because he is good, he does good to people in everything he does. Jeremiah 29:13 says, “I know the plans I have for you declares the Lord, plans to prosper you and not harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.” At every moment of our lives that is what God is doing. He seeks not to harm us, but to do us good, to give us hope and a future.

Former pastor and author, John Piper, says, “God does not bless us begrudgingly. There is a kind of eagerness about the beneficence of God. He does not wait for us to come to him. He seeks us out, because it is his pleasure to do us good.” God is at every moment working to bring about good for us.

In fact, that is the nature of love. At its core love is not an emotion, a feeling. It often is associated with affection or positive feelings. But at its heart love is a commitment, a determination to do good to another person. The Italians have an expression, *ti voglio bene*. It is translated “I love you.” But it literally means “I want good for you.”

God sacrifices

Verse 9 tells us “This is how God showed his love among us; he sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him.” God wanted to do good for us. He wanted to give us life and hope. But the only way he could do that was by making a sacrifice for us that we can never fully comprehend. The choice God had to make was horrifying. But he made that choice, even though it was costly beyond human calculation, to bring us life, to do good to us.

Cost, sacrifice, is the measure of love. How much does someone love you? Well, the calculation is pretty simple. What are they willing to do, how much are they willing to give up, in order to serve you, to bring good to you? If they’re not willing to give up much, then they don’t really love you much, if at all.

Laurie and I got an eyeful of this truth years ago when we were jettisoned by our previous ministry. There were some people we considered friends. They would have said we were some of their best friends. But then we got the heave ho. When we informed them God had given us the chance to begin a new ministry they kind of hemmed and hawed and said, “Yeah, uh, see, we have other friends...” We found out they weren’t much interested in sacrificing to be loyal and encouraging to us. The measure of their love for us was what they were willing to sacrifice, and that was pretty low.

No one ever has or ever will sacrifice for us as God has. Romans 5:8 says he demonstrates his love for us in that while we were sinners Christ died for us. The obvious conclusion from this is that we should never, ever question how much God loves us, because there is no measure of enormity of the sacrifice he has made on our behalf.

But there is something else this tells us about love that is vitally important. In 1 Corinthians 13 Paul wrote in verse 5 that love is not self seeking. Self seeking is the enemy of love. When we are looking out for ourselves we are not loving. To love means to actually give up self, to sacrifice for another. There is no more graphic or profound example of what it means to love than when Jesus died for us. This is why Jesus said in John 15:13 “greater love has no one that this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.” To give up one’s life is the ultimate sacrifice. It is the ultimate act of love.

When we think about love and what it is, by looking at God we learn this truth. If you seek to love, then you must give up serving yourself and sacrifice for the other person. Anything other than that is some form of selfishness masquerading as love.

God gives grace

The amazing thing about this sacrifice is that God didn't make a deal with us. He didn't tell us to make some effort to show him we care about him and then he'd sacrifice for us. He didn't give a set of demands we had to meet in order for him to sacrifice for us. He loved us as we are. Though we were totally undeserving he gave us grace through Jesus. He has forgiven us of everything we ever have done or ever will do in our entire existence through the work of his Son.

Day after day I still mess up, I still fall infinitely short of the glory of God. But still nothing separates me from God's love. Sometimes we bounce back and forth between thinking we're pretty good on the one hand and feeling hopeless on the other. Romans 5:20 is an amazing verse. It says "Where sin increased, grace increased all the more." The New Living Translation of the verse is "As people sinned more and more, God's wonderful grace became more abundant." No matter how great the gap between who we are and who we ought to be, God's grace and love are massively, infinitely more abundant. That is how love acts. 1 Peter 4:8 says, "Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins."

We've been having an unusually mild and warm winter, which is great for those of us who love warmer weather. But one thing has been noticeably absent. Rain. Uh oh. We're going to run out of water. The city of Carlsbad has done a really smart thing. It has built a desalination plant that turns salty water into potable fresh water. We are sitting next to a supply of 187 quintillion gallons of water. That's the number 187 followed by 18 zeroes. The average American uses between 80 and 100 gallons of water a day. Let's use the 100 gallon figure. Suppose you could build a desalination plant that would supply enough fresh water for all 300 million Americans. Do you know how many days it would take to use up the Pacific Ocean? It would take 62 billion days. That's more than 1 and a half billion years. In other words, it's an inexhaustible supply. So think of God's grace and love being like that ocean. It is an inexhaustible supply. No matter how great the need, the grace abounds more.

GOD IS THE SOURCE OF LOVE

Verse 7 says something we must not miss. Love comes from God. God created love, and every bit of love that exists in this world ultimately comes from him. Recently Laurie had to get a new cell phone because hers, aside from having a cracked face plate, her phone battery was fading and the phone started behaving in some strange fashions. So she bought a new I-phone. She got it at the Verizon

store. There are lots of places you can buy I-phones. You can get them at the Apple store, at Best Buy, Target, Walmart, Fry's, online and tons of other places. But no matter where you get it, that phone came from Apple. No Apple, no I phone.

That is a bit like love. You can experience love from a myriad of outlets. It might come from parents, siblings, spouses, friends or children. But no matter where you get it, it ultimately came from God. No God, no love, anywhere, in any form, ever.

Our little granddaughter, Ella, is ridiculously cute and keeps getting cuter. She has funny little words for some things. She loves the BB8 robot from Star Wars. She calls it B8, but everything that has anything to do with Star Wars is B8. Daddy is called Dadden. The TV remote is T-mo-mo. That little kid just fills my heart with love. Laurie took care of Ella and Cara this week one day. She picked them up and brought them home. She said as they got near our house Ella started saying "Bapaw Bapaw," which is her word for me. When they arrived I went out to the garage to get her out of the car and she just lit up. She wanted to hug me because she loves her Bapaw. I was overwhelmed by her little love. But here's the thing, even that little love ultimately comes from God. He is the creator and the source of it, and without him that love would not exist.

I mentioned the water at our house. There are numerous places we can get water at our house, but it all comes from the same place, the water main that brings it to our house. There are many outlets of love in this world, but we need to recognize it all comes from God. It is his idea, he created it, he makes it possible and he sustains its existence every day.

IMPLICATIONS

LET US LOVE AS GOD LOVES

John instructs us to love. Love comes from God. If we are connected to him what will be coming into our lives in such abundance that it flows into all of our relationships? It will be love. The Bible repeatedly commands us to love. We sometimes think of love as being something out of our control. It's a thing that happens to us or it is something that other people make arise in us. It's not true. Real love, God's love, is a choice, a determination and a commitment to do good to others. It is totally independent of what others do. It is a command we can choose to obey. If we will obey it will be powerful.

Part of the reason that Americans flock to movies and television shows is that we are trying to substitute amusement for adventure and meaning in life. But Laurie often talks about another reason. People want to feel something. Life for most of us

is pretty routine and frequently a grind. It can be soul-deadening. So we want to feel something because that makes us feel alive. Movies and television have great potential for impacting us emotionally, making us feel. They can sadden us, anger us, lift our spirits, make us laugh, inspire us, challenge us or, especially, touch our hearts. Earlier this week I turned the TV on and was looking for something to watch. I came across the movie *Field Of Dreams*. It's a 30 year old movie that was kind of strange to begin with, but I love that movie. Boy did Kevin Costner look young. I started watching in the middle of the movie. To my surprise, Laurie came in the room and wanted to watch it too. Here's the weird thing. I've seen that movie many times. I can almost recite some of the lines. The movie has always had an emotional impact on me, but I figured since I've seen it so many times and know what's going to happen it wouldn't affect me. But in the final scene where Ray has the chance to reconcile with his Dad I got all choked up and tears were running down my face. I thought "this is dumb. Why am I so emotional?" Didn't matter. I couldn't stop. And it wasn't just me. Laurie had the waterworks going too. It served as a vivid reminder that seeing a depiction of love winning out can have a powerful effect on us. There was no reason for me to feel so choked up over that movie, but I couldn't help myself. That's how potentially powerful a depiction of real love can be.

In Ephesians 5:21-31 Paul talked about how husbands and wives should relate to each other, at the end saying they should be united so the two should become one flesh. Then in verse 32 he said, "This is a profound mystery—but I am talking about Christ and the church." He was saying that the love between a husband and wife should be like a profoundly touching movie. It provides a living picture of Christ's love for us, a picture so powerful that it circumvents people's brains and goes straight to their hearts.

Earlier this year on the show *This American Life* host Ira Glass had an interview with a marriage therapist named Esther Perel. He asked her if in dealing with couples she sees hope, and asks where hope can come from. She said she would answer him from a different angle. She said, "I once wanted to write an article on couples that inspire. And I asked about 60, 70 people, at the time, if they knew of couples who inspired them. And the vast majority could sometimes, maybe, come up with one. I never wrote the piece, but it's the answer to your question, right? It's that we can see some couples who are very good at this and very good at that, but we don't have that many models where we just say, wow, this is who I want to be, how I want to be."

In other words, people don't see that many couples that inspire, that touch our hearts with their love like that profoundly touching movie. That's part of why God commands us to love each other. That can most powerfully be seen in husbands and wives loving each other, but like I said, love is love, no matter what the context. The same kind of love that builds an inspiring marriage, can inspire through the way we love friends, children, parents, and even our neighbors. That love has the potential to knock down all the barriers people put up to God's love. It goes straight to their hearts and touches them in ways they can't even explain. This is the love God has for us, and it is the love he wants us to have for each other, to the end that it will powerfully affect and inspire others.

The love that flows through us will be God's kind of love. Jesus said in John 13:34, "As I have loved you, so you must love one another." We are to love the way he loves. That means it is a selfless love, a sacrificing love. Remember that self seeking is the enemy of love. To the degree that you are focused on yourself, on your needs, on what you want, you are simply not loving the other person. You are seeking to use them for your selfish wants. God's love is a love full of grace, a love that is as big as the Pacific Ocean and can never be drained. It is a love that keeps loving even when the object of love is utterly undeserving of it.

LET US DRAW ON GOD'S LOVE

If love is from God, and it is, and you want more, you need more to love another person, where do you go to get it? You have to go to God. When I was a kid we used to visit my grandparents in Cleveland. One result of this was that my favorite baseball team in my youngest days was the Cleveland Indians. It seems weird that owners didn't see how limiting this was, but back in those days the only place you could buy major league paraphernalia, like hats, for instance, was at that team's stadium. Jerry and I bought Indians batting helmets. But they were made of plastic and one day we left them sitting in the back of the car where the sun was shining on them. Mine melted a little. It didn't melt down completely, but it had a kind of distorted shape. The problem was, I couldn't replace it. The only way I could get a new one was to go back to Cleveland and buy it there. You had to go to the source.

The amazing thing is that God channels love to us through human beings. We often experience his love from people. But if we try to get all we need from people we will end up frustrated. It won't be enough, for no human is a perfect transmitter of God's love, plus they are not big and strong enough to give us the love we need.

We must draw upon God's unlimited love for us. This is why it is essential that we remember that God's love is personal. He loves the world, to be sure, but he also loves me individually. He loves you, just as you are.

This is where we must go back to that idea that God's love is personal. He loves you today, just as you are. He knows everything about you, and still dotes on you like a parent loves their child. Sometimes we struggle with the idea that God can love us because we feel like we fall so far short.

The reason God is able to love us is that it is his nature to love. His love is not dependent upon our ability to earn or deserve it. He loves because that's just what he does. He is like the sun. It shines, no matter what is going on here on earth. Clouds may come to block it, but it keeps shining still. So God loves because that is his nature.

The most life-changing, powerful experience you can have, is to know and rely on the love of God. It is to live in the utter, unshakable conviction that God loves you and will never stop loving you, and that he loves you without limit no matter who you are or what you do. To live in that love is freeing, empowering in enormous ways, and gives us rock solid security in who we are. Without that love we will be obsessed with ourselves, worried about whether we have value, whether anyone loves us, and we will be trying desperately to get other people to fill that hole, that empty place where we need God's love. But when God's love is filling our souls, we are free and can stop worrying about ourselves.

This week I had a dream where I was at some sort of conference. It was meal time and I went to the dining room at the conference center, but I got there late. Most everyone else had finished eating or were doing something else, so though I looked around for someone I could eat with, there was no one. I sat down and ate all by myself. In the dream it was clear that everyone else had something to do, but no one was interested in being with me. I felt all alone. When I woke up I thought about that dream and it felt all too familiar. I realized it reflected a feeling I've had much of my life that I've mostly been sort of on the outside, kind of left out, and that people don't really want to be my friend. It's a common feeling for many people. It made me once again feel the gratitude for Laurie that I experience every day. She is the best person I know, and she chose to spend her life with me, and wants to be with me every single day. It feels so good to be wanted! But there is another even bigger reality for me to remember, and that is that God chooses me. God loves me more than any human ever could. He wants me just like he wants you. It is so healing to remember this truth. God loves us. He loves us personally,

sacrificially and gracefully. That truth heals our souls and sets us free from our need to always be seeking something for ourselves from other people.

Draw on God's love. Remember that he loves you unconditionally and personally. Ask him to fill you and give you strength to love as he loves