

Love is the Answer
I John 4:7-21
Farmville Baptist Church
Tracy Hartman

Do we have any Jeopardy fans here this morning? Good, let me give you an answer and see if you can provide the correct question. If you noticed the sermon title in the bulletin, you have the answer already. Love is the answer. So what's the question? The correct question this morning is, "Who is God."

The author of I John tells us this with absolute certainty. God is love. He might have said any number of things: God is power or goodness or order. Ronald Cole Turner writes, "In our insecurity and longing for protection, we yearn for a God who will control nature and always prevent sickness or violence. In a world of moral confusion, we wish for a God who lays down the law with complete clarity and holds everyone accountable. In our hunger for more and more things, some of us even imagine a God of prosperity who will provide us with wealth if we only obey a few key principles. Whatever may be true about God's power or moral order or generosity — and I believe God is all of these things, the author of first John bypasses all of these for LOVE. And not just any kind of love, self-sacrificing love.ⁱ It's the central and most important thing he can say about God.

And how do we know this about God? Ken led is in that discussion on Wednesday night — through the life and example of Jesus. We don't have to guess what God and God's love are like, we simply have to look at what God has done.ⁱⁱ The earliest believers got to witness what Jesus did first hand. They saw love when Jesus healed the sick, when he fed the hungry, when he forgave sinners, and when he partied with the outsiders. The women witnessed it when they stood at the foot of the cross and watched the suffering of outstretched arms. And they all

witnessed it when Jesus rose from the dead and empowered them to be His hands and feet in the world. God is love.

But knowing that God is love is only the first step, isn't it? Both last week and this week, the author of I John tells us, in no uncertain terms, that we in turn are to love our brothers and sisters. In today's passage, he goes as far as to say, "Those who love say, 'I love God,' and hate their brothers and 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." Loving our brothers and sisters, even those who seem unlovable, is not an option, it is central to who we are as believers. Episcopal priest Barbara Brown Taylor puts it this way, "The only clear line I draw these days is this: when my religion tries to come between me and my neighbor, I will choose my neighbor. Jesus never commanded me to love my religion."

But we do love our religion, don't we? And we love our church. What were you most excited about when we got to come back into the building for the first time during this pandemic? Was it to worship in the sanctuary again, to get to hear the organ and participate in worship in person? Was it the fellowship - getting to see each other in person - even though we couldn't hug each other? Both of these are great reasons to be here. But if we're honest, how many of us said, "I want to get back to church because Farmville Baptist pours its life into the community and the world, and I can't wait to get back to that?" I'd be honest, that wasn't my first response. On Wednesday night we agreed that we all have room for improvement here, I know I certainly do.

In 2017, Brian McLaren spoke at the CBF national meeting - and he had a good word for those of us who were over 50. He implored us not waste the social and spiritual capital we have earned - but to use our power and influence for good in the world. He also urged the

millennials not to waste their one wild and precious youth ó but to invest it in fresh and authentic ways of loving God and loving our neighbors ó all of them.

One of the best ways that I believe we can love our brothers and sisters at this moment in time is for the church to be an agent of healing in the world. From those who carried Christian signs and flags in the hate-filled assault on the capital in January, to churches that have bought into conspiracy theories and refused to show love by protecting each other with masks and other COVID-19 protocols, to õchurchesö like Westboro who spew hate at anyone who doesn't look and act just like them, people who call themselves Christians and the churches they represent have caused tremendous pain recently.

So what might it mean to model a different way? What might it look like to love our brothers and sisters by being agents of love and healing? In March, J.R. Briggs wrote an article entitled, *10 Ways The Church Can Help Provide Healing in This Wounding Season*.ⁱⁱⁱ I share a few of his suggestions with you this morning.

First, he suggests, and I had to think about this for awhile, is to view Scripture as a book written to traumatized people. The Bible was not written to comfortable, healthy people in power, but instead to a group of discouraged, displaced, distressed, and oppressed people marked by trauma. The book of Lamentations and much of the Psalms contain the raw and desperate prayers of suffering people. One of the simplest and most practical ways for congregations to begin the work of healing in the world is to remember that many people carry trauma, and they need healed by our loving and grace filled God. As we orient our thinking and actions in this way, we will begin to love others more deeply and in more meaningful ways.

The next thing we must do is to tell and listen to stories. Stories have healing power because they connect us. When we are hurt and wounded, we feel disconnected, don't we?

Healing is about connection. When people tell their stories, and they know their stories are being heard by someone who cares about them, it often allows healing to begin.

Next we must explore our own wounds and trauma and look for signs of trauma in others. What do we mean by trauma? Briggs defines it as the inability to process our grief or resolve our pain. It can be any life event that leads to feeling alone and without help or support. It affects our entire being ó mind, body, and spirit. A few weeks ago we talked about our own scars and allowing God to heal them and then work through them to help heal others. Catholic priest Henri Nouwen says that we're all wounded healers. Most of us have suffered some type of loss or trauma ó someone we love died, we experienced divorce, we came back from military service with PTSD ó if we are willing to be open and vulnerable, each of us has wisdom that can help another heal. Even our youth and children have something to offer, and we do well not to ignore what they bring.

Finally, Griggs reminds us that much healing comes when we are under the care of medical professionals, and this is so very important, but he also reminds us to *look for everyday practices and elements where healing can occur*. Healing happens when people strongly sense they are in a safe place to tell their story ó and to hear others tell their stories ó it happens in 12 step programs all the time. But we can offer this safe space in our everyday lives as well. How? By being present with others and showing up. By laughing and crying together. By telling stories together and praying together. By sitting in silence and stillness with no expectation. These are practices, activities, and spaces available to each and every one of us if we are willing to step out in love and faith. Robert Bly puts it this way, Take the first step toward justice. Take a step toward reconciliation. Take a step toward understanding someone different from you. öYou make the path by walking.ö

On a recent webinar about coming out of the pandemic, Gregg Neel, co-pastor at Westminster Presbyterian Church in Portland, Ore. was talking about how his church has decided to accelerate into opportunities outside the church rather than decelerating back into "normal." His message for his church was as harsh as the words of the author of I John that we heard earlier His message? "We simply told the members that we're done educating you; now we want you to put into practice what you've learned." "We're done educating you." Now did he mean that faith formation and discipleship training weren't important? Of course not. In fact, their educational programs will all continue. What was he saying? You know enough already to *do something*. So, *do something*.

Gregg's assertion is that the pandemic has torn an opening in the traditioned fabric of most churches, and now we must jump through that opening. The needs of our surrounding community are so pressing and so obvious. Not to act now on what we already know from years of study is to forfeit the best opportunity we may ever have to love our brothers and sisters.

Friends, over the past year, we have been inwardly focused ó partly because of the pandemic, but partly doing the work we needed to do to prepare for a new pastor. We've made great progress, but some things are appropriately on hold until your new pastor helps you live into a new mission and vision. But that doesn't give us an excuse to sit back and wait until then. There is much we can be about in the meantime.

I know that most of us are tired, it's been a long hard year. But the good news, like we talked about last week, is that we do not have to step out in love and healing alone. We have each other, and most importantly, we have the Spirit who both calls and equips us. May we each and may we all have the courage to step out on faith, because God is love and love is the answer.

The Fourfold Franciscan Blessing

May God bless you with **discomfort**. Discomfort at easy answers, half truths, and superficial relationships, so that you may live deep within your heart. *Amen*

May God bless you with **anger**. Anger at injustice, oppression and exploitation of people, so that you may work for justice, freedom and peace. *Amen*

May God bless you with **tears**. Tears to shed for those who suffer from pain, rejection, starvation and war, so that you may reach out your hand to comfort them and turn their pain into joy. *Amen*

May God bless you with **foolishness**. Enough foolishness to believe that you can make a difference in this world, so that you can do what others claim cannot be done. *Amen*

ⁱ Ronald Cole-Turner, "Theological Perspective," *Feasting on the Word*, Year B Volume 2, p. 466.

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, p. 468

ⁱⁱⁱ J.R. Briggs, 10 Ways the Church Can Help Provide Healing in this Wounding Season, https://freshexpressionsus.org/2021/03/25/10-ways-the-church-can-help-provide-healing-in-this-wounding-season/?goal=0_eb9d1fd14e-171fe659a2-1206136400&mc_cid=171fe659a2&mc_eid=c823dc1706