

“When We Centre on Christ . . . We See Love Differently”

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Fourth in an Advent Series

1st John 4.7-21

December 20, 2015

Dear friends, let's love each other, because love is from God, and everyone who loves is born from God and knows God. The person who doesn't love does not know God, because God is love. This is how the love of God is revealed to us: God has sent his only Son into the world so that we can live through him. This is love: it is not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son as the sacrifice that deals with our sins.

Dear friends, if God loved us this way, we also ought to love each other. No one has ever seen God. If we love each other, God remains in us and his love is made perfect in us. This is how we know we remain in him and he remains in us, because he has given us a measure of his Spirit. We have seen and testify that the Father has sent the Son to be the savior of the world. If any of us confess that Jesus is God's Son, God remains in us and we remain in God. We have known and have believed the love that God has for us.

God is love, and those who remain in love remain in God and God remains in them. This is how love has been perfected in us, so that we can have confidence on the Judgment Day, because we are exactly the same as Jesus is in this world. There is no fear in love, but perfect love drives out fear, because fear expects punishment. The person who is afraid has not been made perfect in love. We love because God first loved us. Those who say, "I love God," and hate their brother or sister are liars, because the person who doesn't love a brother or sister who can be seen can't love God, who can't be seen. This commandment we have from him: Those who claim to love God ought to love their brother and sister also.

1st John 4.7-21
(Common English Bible)

Suppose there's a story you love, a novel you've read again and again. You know the characters. You know the plot. You know what is going to happen and how it ends. You still enjoy it. Every time through, you discover more.

Then, on your umpteenth reading, you're drawn to a new character. Of course she has always been there, but playing a minor role. You hardly noticed her. This time, though, something clicks. You realize that she's been the main character all along. Though she seemed to be on the sidelines, the author had, in fact, cleverly and intricately built the story around her.

How had you missed it? You put the book down, let it sink in. Then you start, once again, from the beginning. You read the same sentences, imagine the same scenes, work through the same chapters as you had so many times before. This time, it reads differently. Of course, you see this now-main character differently. Everything else too. The plot takes on new textures. Minor details become crucial. Things you thought meant one thing, now mean something else. How you see every character changes, all because this one character is at the centre of the story.

II

Now, realize this is real. It is not a fiction. It is the story you are in, that we are all in together. And Jesus is that character. Maybe he's always been there for you, but minor. You've known about him, but have focused elsewhere.

I'm discovering that Jesus is the most important player in this drama we are living. When we see Jesus at the centre of it all, how we see everything else starts changing.

What I'm doing this Advent season is like starting at the beginning of the novel, again. When we find that Jesus is at the centre, we see things differently. We see God differently. We see our world, the *kosmos*, differently. We see ourselves, our shared humanity, differently. And we can keep going. So much is the same, yet everything looks different when Jesus is at the centre. He lets us see and understand, experience and live life as we have not before.

Love, for instance. When Jesus is at the centre, love looks different. God's love looks different. Our experience of God's love is different. How we love one another changes.

There is a danger when we talk about love. Just as there is a danger when we talk about God, or the world, or ourselves. We know about God, right? We know about the world; we live in it. We know about ourselves; we are! And we know about love. We've loved. We've been loved. It's like that novel I was imagining. We think we know what it's all about. But do we?

When we look at Jesus—who he is and what he has done—when we look at him, and then ask, “What is love?,” does our answer change?

III

When I see Jesus at the centre, I am seeing God's love.

Our reading from the 1st letter of John says “*God is love.*” The very nature of God is love.

God's core essence, God's being, is love. God loves, because God is love.

Here's the thing. For me to love, there has to be someone I love. Love is not abstract. It's always particular, always between one and another. Love requires a lover and a beloved.

With God, that could be a problem. Before the beginning of creation, what was there? God! That's it! How could God be love, then, with no one to love? God's very nature must be a relationship. Seeing Jesus, people begin to realize that the one God is a "threeness" — the Father, the Son, and the Spirit. Lover, Beloved and Love itself in eternal relationship, in everlasting love with each other. Even before anything else existed, God was relationship, God was love, God is love.¹

Love fills everything God does. Everything! Even the tough stuff of God — God's anger, God's wrath, God's judgement — are all expressions of God's love. So we can live without fear. The Scripture says, ". . . *we can have confidence on the Judgment Day. . . . There is no fear in love, but perfect love drives out fear. . . .*"

When I see Jesus, I don't need to be afraid anymore, because I see perfect love. I see God the Son, now become flesh and blood like you and me. When I see Jesus, I see God who is love. I see God-love in person.

IV

When I see him, I am seeing what God's love is like.

God's love is freely given. I don't earn it (that's good news, because I can't.) I don't need to deserve it (that's good news, because I don't.) God loves me because of who God is. It does not depend on me. Philosopher Peter Kreeft compares it to the sun shining light on the earth. Why does the sun give us light? It's not that the earth's gravity pulls light from the sun. No, the sun shines because that's its nature. That's what the sun does! "*The sun shines on the earth not because the earth is the earth but because the sun is the sun.*"² Notice in the Christmas stories no one asks for Jesus to be born. He just comes. Unexpected. Surprisingly. Freely. God's love is free.

God's love is vulnerable. Incarnate Love, a baby in a manger. Later, the Saviour, a condemned man on a cross. God loves by putting Godself into our hands. God loves, not by powering-over, but by serving. God is vulnerable.

¹ See the discussion in Peter Kreeft, [The God Who Loves You](#) (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2004), ch. 5.

² Kreeft, 59f.

God's love risks. Love cannot be forced. It cannot be commanded. It can only be offered. So it can be refused, rejected. God risks.

God's love costs. The scripture said: "*This is how the love of God is revealed to us: God has sent his only Son into the world. . . . as the sacrifice that deals with our sins.*" His life and his death, was the price God the Son was willing to pay.

V

When we know this love of God in Jesus, he makes us better lovers.

All love comes from God. Everyone can love, because whether or not someone sees that Jesus is at the centre of the story, they are part of God's story of love. They can love, and are certainly loved. Still, when we realize Jesus is the central character, the God who is love becomes central for us. That makes a difference.

Living with Jesus at the centre, we become different. We become lovers of God, and lovers of whatever God loves. We act lovingly for others, not because of what we get in return. We already have what we need. We are living in the love of God! That is the sweetest fruit, the deepest pleasure, the fullest delight, the most precious treasure. We show love for others because we are now so full ourselves. We are now so changed. "*Dear friends,*" it says, "*since God so loved us, we ought to love one another.*" We ought to. We can. We cannot help it, not when God's love fills us.

Peter Kreeft uses an image that's sticking with me. Love is like playing catch. God throws love to us, and starts the game. We throw it back. The game continues, on and on. If we hold the ball, the game ends. That's no fun. (Kreeft says it's hell!) Keep the game of love going, because God keeps playing, drawing more and more in.³

The love of God for us. Our love for others. Our love for God. All are at the centre, when we see that Jesus is at the centre of this great love-story God is writing. Amen.

³ Kreeft, 69.