

Why Is It So Hard to Love God?
A Sermon on 1 John 5:1-5
Sixth Sunday of Easter
May 6, 2018

Introduction

1 John brings us back to basics. It talks about love more than any other book in the New Testament.

Today the focus turns to loving God. Moody Smith, one of the leading scholars on the Gospel of John and the Epistles of John, says that loving God is something that most Christians believe they should do, but it is not a subject about which many people have very much to say.

It makes us a little uncomfortable. We know we should love God. “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.” That verse, Deuteronomy 6:5 is called the Shema. The faithful in Israel were instructed to recite that verse twice daily.

Most of us know that verse by heart, but how do we live it? The author of 1 John, who I will call the elder, instructs his community, and us, on how to love God.

First Move: Believing That Jesus is the Christ and Son of God

The elder uses the secessionists as a foil to talk about love. The secessionists are a group that recently left the elder’s community. The elder has been criticizing the secessionists’ for their lack of ethics—they do not love their brothers and sisters in the community. They act as if their salvation is assured and they can ignore their brothers and sisters in need. Now the elder turns to criticizing the Christology of the secessionists.

“Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born from God.” The Christ is the one who has been sent from God. The elder believes that God revealed his love for us through the incarnation. God sent the Christ to draw people into communion with him. Love is circular for the elder. By entering into communion with Jesus, the members of the elder’s community enter into communion with God and with each other.

Belief matters. The secessionists emphasize the divinity of Christ and minimize the earthly ministry of Jesus. They believe that salvation came when God sent Jesus

to earth to gather the believers. They have already received the gift of eternal life. The elder believes that they are missing a core belief: Jesus came from God and dwelt among us.

It is through faith in this revelation that the children of God are given birth. We are spiritually born from God by believing that Jesus is the Christ. Belief in this revelation leads us to love God, the one who gave us birth, and to love our brothers and sisters in Christ, who also were born from God.

“In this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and we do the commandments of him.”

The discussion up to this point in 1 John has been about loving your brothers and sisters. The elder catches us off guard by reversing the order: we love our brothers and sisters by loving God. The epistle gives us a sharper, more theological definition of love that we are used to hearing. Not just any definition of love will do. Love must grow out of our relationship with God and Jesus.

There is no true love of God where love of brother and sister is rejected or missing. Yet the love of God is not only horizontal, it is also vertical. We believe that God reveals his love for us through sending his son. Love without a vertical dimension reduces love to a bland humanism.

Loving the children of God has another vertical dimension. We must do the commandments of God.

People today don't like to be told what to do. It helps to look at the commandments as expectations instead of orders. The commandments are what God expects us to do. Commandments show that God cares how we act. When we call people to leadership in the church, we should tell them what is expected of them.

An even gentler word is call. Obeying the commandments is responding to God's call.

What are God's expectations? It is more than your conscience. It comes from outside you. Your conscience internalizes cultural expectations. We can learn about God's expectations by reading Scripture and learning what our ancestors in faith believed that God expected of them.

The elder reassures his community that the commandments are not burdensome. This is very Jewish. Deuteronomy 30:6-11 says that when you love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, you will find that the commandments are not too hard for you.

The elder tells his community that turning to God enables them to conquer the world. Conquer is in the present tense in Greek. The elder is not talking about victory over Rome or victory over other religions. To conquer is to overcome the domain of

evil. It is similar to Paul's idea of the domain of sin. When we are baptized, in Paul's words, or when we believe that Jesus is the Christ, in the elder's words, we move into the domain of God. Jesus frees us from the domain of sin to live to God. Obedience gives us power over the worldly influences that plague us. We make visible our obedience to God at those places in our lives where our identities with family, culture, society and nation wish to dictate our allegiances. Overcoming the world means living in the world without succumbing to its lure, without being governed by it, without accepting its standards.

The elder says that our faith enables us to conquer. Overcoming brokenness and evil is the victory. It is our faith in Christ acting through us that brings the victory. We conquer through the things of God: love, faith and obedience. We do not place our faith in those things that the culture values: achievement, partisan politics, capitalism, technology.

The elder returns to the subject of belief in the final verse. The one who conquers the world is the one who believes that Jesus is the son of God. We believe that Jesus is the Christ and that Jesus is the Son of God.

Second Move: FaceBook Talkback on Loving God

So what keeps us from loving God and doing the commandments of God? I stole CeCe's idea and asked my friends on FaceBook to help me prepare my sermon. I asked them to respond to this question: "Why Is It So Hard to Love God?" This is a talkback session, except during the sermon and from my FaceBook friends.

Some of my friends rejected the question.

Connie Rose, whose daughter Melissa teaches three-year-olds in our Mother's Day Out, said:

It's impossible for me to answer that question because I love God with all my heart and soul. He's my rock. I just can't fathom it being hard to love Him. So sorry, Don. I'm no help at all.

Jenni Markham Clewell, a United Methodist minister who participated in Mary's ordination, said:

It's not hard to love God. It's really, really hard to love people.

Mark Christian, a Unitarian minister, gave a Unitarian response. He said I was asking the wrong question:

My question is, Why must we love God all the time? If God is infinite, then is part of God by definition unlovable since not all of life is lovable?

For the friends who actually answered the questions, their responses fell into three groups.

The first group said that it is hard to love God because we don't love ourselves. Debbie Ingraham, a United Methodist minister, said:

We feel we have to earn love and the concept of love freely given doesn't seem possible—you get what you pay for, so, surely God's Love must be expensive. When we fail to live as we think would please God, we decide we haven't earned it.

Susan Swafford Payne, a Disciples minister said:

I think human beings don't grasp divine love. We live in an exchange economy where you must give or work to receive.

Peter Pham, whose sons went to our Mothers Day Out program, said:

We are disconnected from our true self.

Zach Gleason, a Mennonite pastor, was also succinct:

Because God loves us . . . and we hate us.

Another group of friends said that it is hard to love God when we feel abandoned by God.

Terry Ellis, a former member of this congregation, said:

I can only speak for myself, but I've found it difficult during times when I was unable to feel God's presence. It was almost a sense of abandonment. Later, I realized I was never more surrounded by God. It was my own sense of separateness keeping me from feeling it.

A third group of friends said that it is hard to love God when we struggle with our image of God.

Tim Daniels, a lay person who attended seminary at Brite Divinity School, said:

Why did God let my three year old brother die? If God is all powerful and all love, then why would a loving God allow this to happen? So either God is not all powerful and love goes out but may not be received. Or God is powerful but is just indifferent to human pain and suffering. So those are the spiritual struggles that I have had over my lifetime.

I would add a fourth category: It is hard to love God because we love ourselves more than we love God.

The world, the culture teaches us individualism. Have it your way. Have everything your way. We believe what we want to believe. We do what we want to do.

People drawn to church in our individualistic culture seek out churches for children's programs and music. Do people ever go to church because they believe that they will encounter God there?

People who are actually looking for God make room for God only if they can fit God into our own expectations, beliefs and needs. Can we let God be God? Can we be surprised and challenged by Scripture instead of rejecting the parts we don't like? Can we open ourselves to new understandings of God?

Only the saints seem to love God more than they love themselves.

Third Move: Finding New Images for God

We have been talking a lot on Wednesday night and Sunday morning about the Nones, the people who have given up on church. Nearly half of LGBT folks and 1/3 of millennials fall into the Nones group. If we follow the elder's suggestion and get back to basics, it may help us with the Nones and with our own faith.

One reason that the Nones find it hard to love God is that they are turned off by Christians. The elder is turned off by the secessionists and uses harsh language about them. It could help if we think of ourselves as secessionists and try to come back to an authentic faith.

Melissa Heath, who teaches the three-year-olds in our Mother's Day Out, said:

People associate God with the people who claim to worship Him/Her. A lot of the people will stand on high yet they won't practice the very ideals of Christianity, i.e., love, acceptance, tolerance, openness, transparency. That's not God's fault. Guilt by association? Anyway, that's what I have found when talking to people.

Nones are disgusted with politics in church. They see little difference between conservative churches and liberal churches—they both seem to be preaching and practicing activist politics.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer also was disgusted with politics in church. When Bonhoeffer was a student at Union Theological Seminary in New York, he thought that the students were sacrificing theology for social activism [it was, after all, the beginning of the Depression].

Nones also struggle with the image of God. Diana Butler Bass asks the haunting question, “Where is God”, in every chapter of *Grounded*. Nones can no longer accept the image of a distant God who lives in heaven somewhere beyond the clouds. They are not interested in a church that mediates the space between heaven and earth, acting as a kind of holy elevator, where God sends down commandments and, if we obey, we eventually go up to live with God in heaven forever.

People struggle with the image of God as king, which is a dominant image in the Bible. The idea of a universal God arose about the same historical time period as the great empires. Kings wanted a universal God to unify the empire. Prophets wanted a universal God who had the power to resist the empire.

When we stop thinking to God as a person, the invisibility of God becomes a problem, especially for the Nones. Katie Hightower, who attended here a few years ago, said:

It's hard to fathom such a feeling that we typically attach to things we can touch and reach out for physically. When we don't constantly feel God's presence, it becomes an empty faith game.

Are the Nones afraid that if they go to church, they won't find God?

The invisibility of God can be a problem for us churchgoers, too. We can put God off. God is not a squeaky wheel. We find more pressing things to do than pray. Do we really want to spend time in prayer trying to commune with God? Many people are a lot more interested in communing with their cell phones.

The Nones do believe in transcendence, immanence, presence and the sacred. We all do. We can find those images in nature.

Pat Hoerth, a United Methodist minister who leads our Clergy and Gardening group on the first Friday of each month, suggests that we use images of nature for God instead of images of a person. Draw on images of God as the sun, the stars, the sky, water. The first three chapters in *Grounded* are Dirt, Sky and Water. That is where Diana Butler Bass finds God.

We also can find transcendence, immanence, presence and the sacred in Jesus. Bonhoeffer believes that the God we know is the God we encounter through Jesus.

When Bonhoeffer returned to Germany in 1931, he became a professor of theology. He learned that theology cannot be pursued in quiet isolation. Hitler came to power in 1933 and Bonhoeffer was disgusted that much of the church conformed to the new regime.

His most famous book is *Discipleship*, in which he talks about what it means to be a disciple. His Lutheran training taught him that grace alone was the way of the disciple, but Bonhoeffer shifted the emphasis to obedience. He famously distinguished between cheap grace and costly grace. Costly grace is obedient discipleship, especially obedience to the teaching in the Sermon on the Mount.

Bonhoeffer returned to New York in 1939 at the request of Reinhold Niebuhr to teach at a summer school session at Union Theological Seminary. His friends urged him to remain in America where he could be safe from the threat of war. Bonhoeffer chose the path of costly discipleship. He wrote to Reinhold Niebuhr:

I have made a mistake in coming to America. I must live through this difficult period of our national history with the Christian people of Germany. I will have no right to participate in the reconstruction of Christian life in Germany after the war if I do not share the trials of this time with my people.

The young man who had criticized the activism of American Christianity now became deeply involved in the ecclesiastical and civil politics of Germany. He participated in a plot to assassinate Hitler and spent the last two years of his life in a Nazi prison camp.

Prison did not break Bonhoeffer's spirit. It deepened his love of God. He wrote letters and papers from prison to a former student, Eberhard Bethge. He wrote about writing a book when he got out of prison, no more than 100 pages. He wanted to talk about religionless Christianity. His objection to religion was that it focused on

salvation from this life when it should be turning us back into the world. He talked about God as a working hypothesis. Abstract belief in the omnipotence of God is not a genuine experience of God but a partial extension of the world. Encounter with Jesus is how we find God. His being there for others is the experience of transcendence. The transcendent is not infinite and unattainable tasks, but the neighbor who is within reach.

Bonhoeffer never got to write that book. He was executed in April 1945, just before the prison camps were liberated. The camp doctor wrote:

Through the half open door in one room of the huts I saw Pastor Bonhoeffer kneeling on the floor praying fervently to his God. I was most deeply moved by the way this lovable man prayed, so devout and so certain that God heard his prayer. At the place of execution he again said a short prayer and then climbed the steps to the gallows, brave and composed. His death ensued after a few seconds.

Conclusion

Loving God is hard for some, easy for others. It depends on where we are in your faith journey. It may hard for us to love God because we are confused about ourselves or about God or because we are disgusted with how God is reflected in the church.

If we are struggling to love God, it helps to get back to basics. The core Christian belief for the elder, and for Bonhoeffer, is that God is made known to us through a human Jesus. Butler Bass adds that God is also made known to us through nature.

Belief for the elder and Bonhoeffer and Butler Bass leads to action. We are not waiting for the sweet by and by. We get out of our own little world and engage with nature and with the people around us. We will find God there.

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