

**GOD IS LOVE**      Readings: 1John 4:7-21      Easter V/B      4/28/24  
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“Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love.” (1John 4)

How many people here are on Facebook? Last month, there was a Facebook post that trashed the Christian religion, accusing it of being a destructive force in our country that threatens democratic rule. This particular post focused on the mean spiritedness of many Christians who have a disregard for human rights, an elevation of Trump to a Christ-like figure, and a focus on fundamentalist doctrine rather than righteous living. In summary, it was a caricature of Christianity that hurt my heart.

In response, I replied to this post by clarifying the true nature of Christianity, emphasizing Jesus' path of compassion as the template for Christian behavior. I spoke about the Divine Word entering human history through a helpless, brown, middle eastern, Jewish baby, born of a yet-to-be-married couple. I mentioned how the spirit of God descended upon this child who would grow up to be a healer, the anointed one, a prophet who identified with the powerless, the oppressed, the poor, and the homeless. I emphasized that Jesus had the insight & courage to challenge the destructive powers of the world that included oppression by the Roman Empire, misogyny by the patriarchy, the corruption and hypocrisy of religious officials, the degradation of the poor by the rich, the violence against the weak by the powerful, and a series of laws that dictated legalism over compassion. And that he paid a big price for his efforts!

In response to my post, a different person wrote the following: *“Karen Siegfriedt...was Jesus born to the unmarried couple, or was he born by a virgin with no sperm involved? Why does the story need someone to “break the chains of death?” I can't go for the virgin birth or resurrection. Aside from those two sticking points, I can get behind the things Jesus said and taught, assuming the story was factually written at the time. Why do we have to believe things that can't happen. And why is it that people who don't buy those two sticking points are not allowed to “go to heaven” whatever that might be, even stellar humans who try to love and share and care like Jesus said. And the problem of people in other countries and cultures who follow other teachers. They don't even get the chance to “go to heaven.” I was raised in a Christian home. But I don't think it is necessary to do or say or believe specific things in order to have something good happen when I die (heaven) as opposed to the bad thing (hell). Who knows what happens when we die? And also, you said Christians follow in Jesus' steps and spread his message of compassion. I would think that a Christian who is trying to follow Jesus and spread his message of compassion would be disgusted by 45 [i.e. the previous president].*

She then went on a political rampage criticizing Christians who embrace partisan politics over Jesus' message of love. She believes that Christians “must be stupid all the way around” by taking all the stories in the Bible literally, thus conditioning them to believe untrue and hateful things uttered by politicians while buying up Bibles to support a candidate's political ambitions. She ends the post with saying: “Where is the voice of normal Christians? I don't get it!”

Wow...what a sad commentary on Christians and Christianity! This too breaks my heart.

- How did it come to be that the perception of Christianity is mostly about believing in 10 impossible things before lunchtime rather than loving God and one's neighbor?
- How did it come to be that a large swarth of Christians in the United States have transformed Jesus Christ from “a humble servant of the abject poor to a symbol that stands for gun rights, prosperity theology, anti-science, and a limited government that neglects the destitute?”
- How has it come to be that many churchgoers now view the teachings of Jesus Christ (such as in the sermon on the mount) as nothing more than “liberal talking points?”
- Why have both progressive and conservative churches of protestant and catholic denominations allowed partisan tribalism to take precedence over Jesus' teachings on love?
- Why are many worshippers more interested in specific rituals, liturgies, and particular music rather than loving God with their whole heart, mind, and soul?

My take on all of this is that Christians have forgotten that Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life. This is the kind of life we are called to embrace. Perhaps the problem is that we limit God to an idea or a philosophical belief that simply gives us comfort in times of challenge and death. Maybe it has to do with allowing our moral compass and political choices to be more influenced by materialism and financial concerns than the biblical precepts of compassion. Kurt Vonnegut, an American novelist once said: “We’ll go down in history as the first society that wouldn’t save itself because it wasn’t cost-effective.” Bottom line is this: Jesus pointed to and exemplified the path of love, generosity, mercy, and inclusivity and said, “Come follow me.” But instead of following him, many engraved his finger in stone and began worshiping his finger rather than following in his footsteps.

My friends in Christ, now is the time for us to revisit the essentials of Christianity. Now is the time to lift up our voices and spread the good news in Christ, exemplifying love to those Facebook fans who have lost faith. The first letter of John (which we read today), spells out how to proceed. Let’s take a closer look

Today’s reading answers the following questions: Who is God? How does God manifest God’s self? How do we even know God if we can’t see God? How do we know if we are on the right track? The answer to all these questions is one word: *LOVE*. God is love. The kind of love that God shows us and the kind of love we are to show others is not some romantic sentiment or an individual feeling or something to add to our “to do” list. It is a sacrificial way of life, commonly referred to in Greek as *agape*. It is a love that expects nothing in return. This kind of love is an action, not a feeling. The person who refuses to love doesn’t know the first thing about God, because God *is* love—so you can’t know God if you don’t love.

Some try to redefine the nature of God through specific theologies, restrictive moral codes, fear of retribution, or proper liturgical practices. These redefinitions sometimes create a caricature of Christianity that often shows up on Facebook. But the letter of John cuts to the chase: “Everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love...If we love one another, God lives in us and God’s love is perfected in us.” (1John 4:7-21) In other words, love God and love your neighbor. Everything else in Christianity is simply a commentary on this great commandment!

On Friday morning, I read a post on “Next Door” by Susie Anderson. This is what she wrote: “My somewhat elderly husband had a mishap while walking home on Highway 1 to Cayucos, after his electric car failed to power up in Morro Bay to get him here. He abruptly fell, without apparent cause. He fell to his knees on the pavement, and he couldn’t get up or roll over to help himself. Enter our amazing community...as citizens came to his rescue. They are a local couple who stopped on the highway to help him get up; and they even drove him home to me. We didn’t get your full names, but we thank you millions for your deeply kind assistance. He is a little shaken, but otherwise well now. Thanks to you. He noticed at least 4 other stopped cars, presumably more good Samaritans, and we thank them, too. So many great people live here! We are grateful to be among you.”

This is exactly what John’s letter reminds us to do: to love one another through acts of compassion! “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.” (1John 4:7-21)

\*We live in a world of outrageous pain. The only response to outrageous pain is outrageous love. (Marc Gafni)

\*People were created to be loved. Things were created to be used. The reason why the world is in chaos is because things are being loved and people are being used. (Dali Lama)

\* Do your little bit of good where you are. It’s those little bits of good put together that overwhelm the world. (Desmond Tutu)

\* Love is never wasted. For its value does not rest on reciprocity. (CS Lewis)

\* Jesus said: No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. (Jn. 15)

\* John said: “Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God...and God is love.” (1John 4:1)

“Now may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all...and may God so strengthen your hearts in holiness that you may be blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.” (Blessing from 1 Thess. 3:12-13)

