

# Fifth Sunday of Easter, Year B

## WHOSE LOVE?

1 John 4:7-21

Fifth Sunday of Easter, Year B

Analysis by Peter Keyel

*7 Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. 8Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. 9 God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. 10 In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. 11 Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. 12 No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us, and his love is perfected in us.*

*13 By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit.*

*14 And we have seen and do testify that the Father has sent his Son as the Savior of the world.*

*15 God abides in those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God, and they abide in God. 16 So we have known and believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. 17 Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness on the day of judgment, because as he is, so are we in this world. 18 There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. 19 We love because he first loved us. 20 Those who say, "I love God," and hate a brother or sister are*

liars, for those who do not love a brother or sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen. 21 The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.



*From Canva*

*"It is not our love that satisfies God or makes things right. It is God's love for us that does so."*

***Author's Note: Even the least biblically inclined people are aware of this pericope and epistle, even if they cannot name or quote it. "God is love" is the main takeaway, and that is now a fixture of Western culture. Here, the focus is in how this can quickly slide from proclamation of what God has done for us into***

*a generalized commandment that we all think we can fulfill without any need for God.*

## **DIAGNOSIS: All you need is love**

**Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem): *Love is the one thing you must do: God is Love?***

The text seems to command that love is the one thing you must do (v. 21). Don't need to worry about anything more or anything less. All of those other commandments and suggestions fall away in the face of love. This is also an easy way to conflate religions – if they value love, they all know God in their own way, and that is enough. Good people love their fellow humans, and loving them is enough to satisfy God and anyone else who may care to critique us. As long as we try hard, and hold to love, we'll be ok.

**Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem): *Lying in our Fear and Hatred: We Know God Because We Love?***

The probing of our problem focuses on the quality and reality of your love: is there fear (v. 18)? Do we hate others (v. 20)? In other words, is your love real? But both of those focus on the commandment to love God, which is Law.

'Do you really love God' is an easy route to go with this pericope. Especially if there's some kind of conflict between people who all agree that God is love. The Law is great for diagnosis. "What is love" becomes the focus, sometimes with a "how-to," sometimes with a "just wing it and it will work out" approach. Tackling the question "are you really loving your neighbor" often moves to calling people liars (cf. v. 20). Perhaps they are. While "what is love?" is an important question, perhaps a bigger question (taken almost for granted in the text) raised in this pericope concerns our relationship with God. Can we be saved by the Law, even one as important as "love

others"? Or in other words, is holding love in our hearts enough to satisfy whatever Power rules the universe? Hindu, Muslim, Jew, Christian, agnostic, atheist, etc. ... it's all the same as long as we agree that we serve love... right?

### **Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem): *"Love is God"***

In the text, the final criticism is in the negative – if you fail to love others, you cannot love God, which means you do not abide in God, so God will not abide in you. All of that is bad news, so you better love. Not only that, it better not have any fear and be "perfected" love (v. 18), despite the implicit threat.

While that is all terrifying and everything, if you serve Love, everything is fine. Right?

The problem is that we are often tempted to switch from "God is love" to "Love is God" in practice. If you having love is all you need, you are the focus, not God. Soon, your definition of love becomes all important. That definition justifies many actions you might want to take. Maybe those actions hurt other people. Maybe they don't... they just leave God out of it. Then the Christian God becomes one face of a more expansive Deity called "Love" that encompasses all people, Christian or not. The Christian God is no longer needed, and becomes no longer present or meaningful.

In other words, God no longer abides in you.



*From Canva*

## **PROGNOSIS: All you need is God's love**

### **Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution): *God saves us out of love***

The epistle spells out what "God is love," and how it is NOT about our love: "God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins." (vv. 9-10)

The mechanism for God's love is specifically Jesus' death on the cross to put to death all of our failures, sins, imperfect love, and other short-comings. That God's love for us is stronger than our service to other gods, including our ideas of love, is borne out in Jesus' resurrection from the grave.

We are saved by God's love for us, not by our love for God or

neighbor.

**Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution): *We believe the love God has for us***

Centering on the love God has shown us in Jesus changes the equation. It is no longer about the quality of our love. It is our trust that "God abides in those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God, and they abide in God. So we have known and believe the love that God has for us." (vv. 15-16a).

It is not our love that satisfies God or makes things right. It is God's love for us that does so. Trusting that promise of love is God abiding in us. We are assured of God's presence through our faith that Jesus is the Son of God who was crucified for us.

**Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution): *God's love is perfected in us***

The outcome of trusting God abiding in us is love for others. The key difference from the beginning is that when we trust that "God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him." We do not live from our fear, nor from our alienating ourselves from others in hatred. Fear and hatred have been overcome on the cross. Our love becomes perfected love when it is grounded in this Promise. That's because the focus is God's love for us, not our love for God, or even our love for others. Or as phrased in the pericope: "God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness on the day of judgment, because as he is, so are we in this world." (vv. 16b-17)

This frees us to live in love and testify to our Savior. Through this, we reflect God's love in this world.

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# Ash Wednesday – Year B

## THE PROBLEM AND PROMISE OF REWARDS

Ash Wednesday

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

Analysis by Bruce K Modahl

*[Jesus said to the disciples:] 1“Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven.*

*2“So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward.*

*3But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing,*

*4so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.*

*5“And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward.*

*6But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.*

*16“And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received*


*their reward.*

*17But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face,  
18so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your  
Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will  
reward you.*

*19“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth  
and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal;  
20but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither  
moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and  
steal.*

*21For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”*





**The gospel is preached  
to us and preached into  
us so that we come to  
trust the one who tells  
us the truth, “You are  
dust and to dust you  
shall return.” ...**

*From Canva*

*The gospel is preached to us and preached into us so that we come to trust the one who tells us the truth, “You are dust and to dust you shall return.” ... The reward he brings is forgiveness.*

# DIAGNOSIS: Dust to Dust

## Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem):

*Stripped of light  
We perform a pantomime of perfection.*

The lines above and at Step 2 come from Philip Kolin's poem "The Catechumens Recite their Scrutinies." Jesus scrutinizes the pious rituals of some and finds them to be pantomimes, performances, charades. They are not real. In a Christian publication I spotted an advertisement for a seminary. The advertisement featured a photograph of an Ash Wednesday service with student worship leaders imposing ashes. What drew me to the ad were the smiles on their faces as they reached their ashy thumbs to the foreheads of those who stood before them. How is it possible to smile at people and at the same time tell them, "You're going to die"? This must be staged for the camera, I thought. Perhaps they were saying different words, words they could smile over.

## Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem):

*We are lost in the dense darkness of self*

*Confusing the space of a coffin with*

*The  
size of a galaxy.*

In the Lenten season, God would draw us into the biblical narrative. The one who imposes the ashes repeats what God said to Adam and Eve as he banished them from the garden, "You are

dust and to dust you shall return” (Gen. 3:19). We are inclined to pantomime the action and skip those words because we don’t want to hear such things. And we don’t want to hear such things because we don’t trust the One who first spoke them.

### **Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem): *Banished***

The crowd rewards the pantomime performer with approval and applause. We create a narrative for our lives with ourselves at the center. With ourselves as the sum and substance, the narrative begins and ends in the dust. We have confused the space of a coffin with the size of a galaxy. It is to the grave we are banished.



Jesus fed the hungry,  
healed the sick, tended  
to the needs of (in  
Robert Capon’s words)  
the least, the last, and  
the lost.

From Canva

# PROGNOSIS: Cruciform Dust

## **Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution): *Rewarded***

And yet it is to that narrow chamber our Lord comes with his reward. God in Christ came from and returned to the dust as do we. He died on the cross for us. For our sakes he was buried. To the dust he committed our trespasses. The reward he brings is forgiveness. He rewards us with his own righteousness. On the third day this Man of dust rose from the dead and ascended to the right hand of the Father. The reward he brings is eternal life. So, the ashes inscribed on our foreheads form the shape of a promise.

## **Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution): *New Life in Christ***

At baptism the Holy Spirit inserts our lives into God's narrative. The Holy Spirit writes us into God's story. This good news is foreign to us. What is native to us is we must earn the reward. The gospel is preached to us and preached into us so that we come to trust the one who tells us the truth, "You are dust and to dust you shall return." There is nothing to smile about here. We can admit the truth about ourselves because we trust the one who speaks it to us. This is the One who forgives us, gives us his righteousness, promises us life eternal, and indeed gives us a great deal to smile about.

## **Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution): *Sharing the Rewards***

We do not hoard the rewards we receive from God. We share them. I propose we undertake the disciplines of Lent as Christ's benefits we share with others.

Repentance: We have the benefit of being able to turn to God for forgiveness not seven times but endless times. We are entrusted with the ministry of reconciliation in the places where we live and work.

Prayer: Luther says God commands us to pray and promises to listen. Robert Jenson writes that as we live in Christ, we enter into the living personal community between the persons of the Trinity. We pray, he says, “to the Father, with the Son, in the Spirit.” This puts a new spin on the saying, “All we can do is pray.”

Fasting: If we give up something for Lent, let it be for the benefit of others. For example, give up a fast-food meal once a week and give the money saved to the community food bank.

Works of love: Luther made a distinction between political righteousness and the righteousness we have from Christ. In the political or civic sphere of life, works of love are works seeking justice. Jesus fed the hungry, healed the sick, tended to the needs of (in Robert Capon’s words) the least, the last, and the lost. With the benefit of Christ’s righteousness, we can’t help but seek justice in the neighborhoods and world in which God has planted us.

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# **Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Year A**

## **Christ, Better than Nextdoor**

**Matthew 18:15-20**

**Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost**

**Analysis by Matt Metevelis**

*15If another member of the church sins against you, go and point*

out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. 16But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. 17If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. 18Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. 19Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. 20For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them."





Chatting Neighbors – Bernard Blommers  
(1845–1914) [From Wikimedia Commons](#)

*The connection that we have with Jesus as sinners—just doing our best in a broken world—is deeper than any connection that we seek to create. Our neighbors sometimes can only see who they want us to be. Jesus dies for us because of who we are.*

## **DIAGNOSIS: Disconnected by Sin**

### ***Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem): Seeking Connection***

A large part of my morning routine has become checking the feed on the “Nextdoor” app. Unlike other social media platforms that connect me to old friends and people who share my interests from

around the world, Nextdoor connects me to people who live in close proximity. My feed is full of posts from people who live in my work and home neighborhoods, and the ads are usually for local businesses. As strange as it is to use the internet and electronic means to connect with people that I could just as well meet by a quick stroll or a block party, I've come to enjoy seeing what is going on near me and indulging in a bit of local gossip. Nextdoor aims to foster this sense of connectedness. It's trying to put back together what nearly a century of rapid technological progress has torn apart. The internet has us so distracted by our screens, that we interact less and less with the world of real people around us with our lives, livelihoods, interests, and ideas. Being a real-time neighbor has ceased to be a meaningful social construct for most Americans and is now merely a geographical term (especially in upper-income areas). Just like trendy breweries designed to look like old time neighborhood establishments. Nextdoor tries to inject some digital juice and nostalgia into the scrapyard of neighborly solidarity and cohesion.

### ***Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem): From Neighbors to Accusers***

Nextdoor describes its mission as "bringing neighbors and organizations together to cultivate a kinder world where everyone has a neighborhood they can rely on." It's a wonderful idea. Too bad I rarely experience it on Nextdoor. Someone is stolen from. The power company is scamming people with high rates. People drive like idiots. Someone is making too much noise. Did you see what all that police activity was about around 3 PM the other day? People are acting weird in that one house down the block. What might that person be up to in the funny hat? Crime is out of control because a single incident of shoplifting is witnessed. A woman posted that someone in a white van was driving too fast around my son's school; I was



able to report that I thought someone matching the description was pulled over a block away. But someone commented that the real problem is that kids today are too reckless, and you shouldn't fault someone trying to get a kid to school and then get to work. I was about to respond, "Drive like that around my kid and I will show you what reckless looks like," but I remembered that since I use my real name, she might be able to identify me as a pastor on Google.

Aside from the occasional found pet, or shout out to a decent restaurant, most of Nextdoor is an Olympics of self-righteousness and paranoia. I sympathize when someone is venting a little about a bad day. I smile when someone is being called out. I cringe a little when thinly veiled or casual racism shows its ugly face. But as a student of human nature, I can only revel in the petri dish that is my Nextdoor feed. People might tell you that they want a "kinder world," but what they really want is to go about their business with as little hassle as possible, pay back all the dirty cheats and terrible motorists that wrong them, and avoid anyone who might be perceived as a threat. The mission statement of Nextdoor proclaims a hope but the feed reveals the reality. We want to rely on one another, but we disappoint one another all the time. We all want to get along, but we don't.

### ***Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem): An Unkinder World***

Neighborhoods can be pools of grievance just as much as they can be pillars of reliance. In each neighborhood there are memories and cautionary tales of rights and wrongs, heroes and villains, suspicions and distrusts. No matter what external laws govern them, there are as many more laws in them as there are residents. Being a neighbor sometimes means delineating where my property begins and yours ends. But holding you accountable for your negligence may involve me denying mine. Each of us in

the daily grind becomes a law unto ourselves. Deeper connections, whether they are digital or physical, always threaten to unleash such caprice. These connections can serve us, or they can be to our disadvantage. We will never always be able to do right by one another. The law we carry around in our hearts contains our lofty expectations, our fragile egos, and our aversion to shame. Without an outside force to justify us, we will continually justify ourselves. We shout (or type) the verdicts loudly for all to hear. We're not connected, because at the core we are busy denying the accusation of the law against us and levying it squarely toward others.



Reconciliation-A Space Where Mercy and Forgiveness Meet. By James Emery [From Wikimedia Commons](#)

## **PROGNOSIS: Reconnected in Christ**

***Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution): Church: What We***

## ***Rely On***

Nextdoor promises a “kinder world” and a more connected neighborhood through its social media tools. Christ makes a more reliable promise in our text. But note that he does not do so by talking about communitarian hopes. He doesn’t say, “I will build a kingdom which is really connected, where people really love one another and can rely on one another.” Jesus is much smarter than that. He knows that we can’t be relied on.

But Jesus knows that he can be relied on. That is why he closes this teaching with a promise: “Wherever two or more are gathered there I am among them.” What connects the Christian community is not anything the people in the community do. It is the presence of Christ among them, crucified in their midst for their sins, taking every insult, mockery, derision, and “smh” (“shaking my head”) that we dish out to one another; and he wears it on the cross. After all, just as he tells the Father from the cross, we don’t know what we do. It is not as good neighbors, or loving people that we are drawn together in Christ. Instead, Christ gathers us in, sinners that we are, to be present with us even when we have to distance ourselves from one another because of our failures. Our goal as a Church is not to legitimize our existence with bigger attendance numbers or vindicate ourselves with anybody else. The connection that we have with Jesus as sinners—just doing our best in a broken world—is deeper than any connection that we seek to create. Our neighbors sometimes can only see who they want us to be. Jesus dies for us because of who we are.

## ***Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution): Freed to be Face to Face***

But Jesus does not promise to be with us just so forgiveness is for our personal benefit. This forgiveness from Christ and

restoration with God is meant to reign concretely in our relationships and not just get filed away in our hearts. Christ is already between me and my neighbor, so I no longer need to face off against him in a chasm of hurt feelings, accusation, and superiority. The Olympic contests are cancelled. I am free to honestly and truthfully confront those who have hurt me, but only if the situation cannot be resolved in any other way. In the end, the goal is not proving how right I am; the goal is “regaining” a sibling. With my own righteousness taken off the table by Christ’s cross, I am free to speak to my neighbor—sinner to sinner—revealing my hurts, speaking about my needs.

#### ***Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution): Reconnected***

Connection is not about us never fighting; it’s about our mistakes and misunderstandings being handled with honesty, grace, and care. These things cannot be built with intricate digital tools, or with the hope that people of common interests will connect. They are built slowly through time as people work together, endure trials together, and are able to see one another as flawed but forgiven. The first word that Christ says after “when a neighbor sins against you” is the simple command “go.” As Christ comes to us, we go then with courage into the difficult relationships that we endure. And we do so because Christ has promised to be there. The connection that every community relies on is the greatest connection of all: the connection of two sticks of wood with a God speaking forgiveness from it. From that cross Jesus empowers us to speak that forgiveness to one another.