

Fifth Sunday of Easter – Epistle

THE LOVE OF GOD

1 John 4:7-21

Fifth Sunday of Easter

Analysis by Steven C. Kuhl

7 Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. 8 Whoever 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 lives in us, and his love 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 believed 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 cast out all 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 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. 21 the commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.

DIAGNOSIS: The Cycle of Hatred Leaves Us Loveless

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) – *Hatred between Brothers and Sisters (v. 20)*

We know all too well about the hatred that permeates the world. It makes for war, terrorism, economic exploitation, cutthroat competition, winners and losers. Hatred is an often subtle-and sometimes overt-disregard for the life of others. And how easy it is to justify. “We hate others because they first hated us.” That’s the way the world has operated since the beginning-at least, since Cain hated Abel (3:12). So pervasive is hatred that nobody really knows where it starts, let alone how it might end. Hatred just is! It is the substance of the law of reciprocity and the essence of justice. The courts no longer can execute simple justice, but in doing so they inevitably end up also defending hatred: hatred toward victims of crime and vengeance against the perpetrators of crimes. Hate crimes beget hate justice, and the cycle of hatred is perpetuated. But then, who are we, the church, to talk about the world “out there”? The initial diagnostic point of this epistle is that the cycle of hatred still threatens us, too! How easy it is, even in the church, to respond to our brothers and sisters in hatred (v. 20), and then justify it: “we hate them because they first hated us.” It doesn’t take a genius to see it happening all around—at the council meeting, around the coffeepot, in the parking lot, during the Bible study, in daily interactions. Hate begetting hate is not only all around us, but also among us.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) – *Fear Deep Within* (v. 18) = *The Knowledge of Sin*

This cycle of hatred, as John helps us to realize, doesn't simply come from "out there," from being hated first by another person. How we would like to believe that, but it just isn't so. Nor is it the fault of the reign of justice or the law of reciprocity, though justice and reciprocity too get co-opted. Rather, the cycle of hatred is driven by what is inside us—the best clue of which is "fear," which, as John tells us, is a "fear" that "has to do with punishment" (4:18). That qualifier, "punishment," is important. For "punishment" has to do with what "justice" means to a sinner or, as John gently defines it here, to "whoever has not reached perfection in love" (v. 18). The "fear" of punishment is the internal signal that sin (hate mongering, the opposite of love) lurks within us, waiting for opportunity to express itself in the cloak of justice. The cycle of hatred that permeates this life, therefore, is not really about a sincere love for justice or a humble exercise of the law of reciprocity. Rather, it signals the very opposite. It signals a "fear" (indeed, hatred) of justice and the law of reciprocity, because it signals the "fear" (hatred) of punishment which is what justice means to hate-justifying sinners. The "fear of punishment" is a fear that corresponds to unrequited "sin" that is within.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) – *Loveless on the Day of Judgment* (cf. v. 18)

The cycle of hatred that is driven by the fear of punishment is not an illusion, but a signal that the world and indeed, we ourselves (when so enmeshed and so predisposed) are Loveless: meaning, says John, we lack the love of God. For John the "love of God" is not in the first instance the objective genitive, meaning that we do not love with God's kind of love, but the subjective genitive, meaning we are not being loved by God. But

note: it is not that the world or we lack God, but the “love of God.” The world never lacks God, the God of justice and reciprocity that is. After all, God is the one who brings justice; God is the one who sanctions reciprocity; God is the one who gives rise to the fear of punish; God is the one who will requite sin; God is the one who will meet out “punishment” on the “day of judgment”-whether that day of judgment is anticipated/signaled in today’s affairs (the wars and rumors of war that abound) or simply imposes itself on the last day. But note, this judgment or punishment on the part of God is not “hatred” as we mortals know it. This punishment is simple, thoroughgoing, ultimate justice. For sinners, the opposite of love may be hate—for justice, which we fear (hate), is really indistinguishable from hate, at least in its ultimate consequences. But for God, the opposite of love is justice, because only “perfect love casts out fear” (v. 18), and thus overrules punishment/justice. But what sinners (people who know in experience only of hatred and justice) really care about that moot point? The end result is the same.

Prognosis: The Love of God Casts Out Fear—Abolishing Hatred, Overruling Judgment

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) – *God’s Love Is the Son’s Atoning Sacrifice (v. 10).*

What sinners really care about this seemingly moot point? Actually, those who “know” through experience the love of God (subjective genitive) in Christ Jesus. In Christ Jesus, not only does the “love of God” find its definition, but it becomes reality, an integral part of the life of the world—and its defining characteristic is the Son’s “atoning sacrifice for our sin” (v. 10). Here, in the cross of Christ, the cycle of hatred is broken. Christ does not retaliate against those who hate him. But that is not the most amazing thing about Christ and his bearing of the cross. Still more amazing than what he DOES NOT

DO in the cross (namely, retaliate against sinners, which he had all the right to do, sinless as he was) is what he DOES DO: he actually overrules the law of reciprocity, the just action of God against sinners, including that final verdict that justice would demand on the day of judgment, by suffering it to death. In place of the rule of reciprocity, then, Christ rose to establish the rule of the “love of God.” Rather, than giving sinners what they deserve, just recompense for their sin, God in Christ gives “love,” which means “atonement for our sins” (v. 10), the forgiveness of sins. The Love of God in Christ, which is defined and made real by the cross of Christ, is a literal breaking of the cycle of hatred by first breaking the law of reciprocity, giving forgiveness where it is not deserved. To “know the love of God,” therefore, is not the same as knowing the law of reciprocity. It is more. To know the love of God is to know Christ and his “atoning sacrifice for our sins.”

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) – Knowledge as Boldness on the Day of Judgment (v. 17)

The Love of God in Christ, however, is not a secret transaction. Indeed, the love of God is nothing unless it is “revealed among us” (v. 9), unless it is “known” (vv. 7, 13, 16). For John, as for the whole Scriptural witness, the “love of God” (whether of God’s judgment or God’s love, is never simply a speculative kind of knowledge). To know God in a biblical way is to know God personally, in our gut, in such a way that God “abides in us” (v. 13, 15) or “God lives in us” (v. 12), as John variously describes it; love impacts and defines our whole person. In other words, to “know” God’s love in Christ is to receive and welcome it for what it gives. It is for the sake of that kind of knowledge that John, here in this text, and the preacher, where you worship each Sunday, proclaims the atoning sacrifice of Christ as the unmistakable act of God loving you. As John variously puts it, the “Love of God” poured out in the cross of

Christ isn't really known by us in a vital, meaningful way until we know it as the "atoning sacrifices for OUR sins" (v. 10), until that love casts out OUR "fear of punishment" (v. 18), until that news gives US "boldness on the day of judgment." For "there is no fear [for those who are] in [the] love [of God]." That's what v. 18 is all about. To put it another way, more pointedly, no matter how much a person loves us, unless it is received as loved, experienced as love, trusted as love, believed as love, we are not being loved. Love is that vulnerable. While the law of reciprocity and simple just do impose themselves upon us, love cannot impose itself on anyone. To do so would be "arrogant" and "rude" (1 Corinthians 13:4), which, as Paul asserts, has nothing to do with love. John's whole language of "knowledge," therefore, correlates with Paul's language of faith, especially, on this crucial point. Indeed, John himself puts it, "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. 15-16).

Step 6: Final Diagnosis (External Solution) – *"We love because God first loved us" (v. 20)*

Because the love of God is made real in Christ and made ours by faith, the believer lives in the world on the basis of a whole new premise: not the premise of the law of reciprocity or conventional justice, based on what my neighbor has first done to us, but on the premise of God's love, what God has first done for us. "We love because God first loved us" (vv. 20). God's love for us is prevenient, as the old theologies would say, or "preemptive," a popular word today. Accordingly, that bold precedent-loving preemptively—is the basis of the Christian life. Our love for the brother and the sister is also a preemptive type of love, because it is the love with which God in Christ first loved us. Love is the new nature of those who know the love of God. However, the fact that Christians doesn't

live on the basis of the law of reciprocity and simple justice, but on the love of God, does not mean that the Christian despises the law of reciprocity and simple justice or ignores them. Not at all! Remember, in the initial diagnosis, how we noted that the law of reciprocity and simple justice have become co-opted by the cycle of hate. Those features of God's good creation need redemption as much as people do. Who then is better equipped to love justice and reciprocity and free them from the cycle of hatred than those who no longer "fear" its punishments? Who is better equipped to use the law of reciprocity and systems of justice for God's good and loving purposes than those who can stand up to it with "boldness on the day of judgment" (v. 17), those who can welcome what it has to say. Who, indeed, but we who know the love of God in Christ, who possess by knowledge the "atoning sacrifice [of Christ] for our sins, and who on that basis now love God? For "those who love God must love their brother and sister also" (v. 21). That is their new, divine, nature.