

That's Just the Kind of God I Am

I John 4:7-12

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December 19, 2021

The title of my sermon is “That’s Just the Kind of God I Am,” and what I am about to preach is the foundation for everything that I have said to you over the last 38 years. So, if you haven’t been listened to any of the rest of my sermons, listen now.

In the early 1900’s, the Austrian philosopher and social reformer, Rudolf Steiner, founded the Waldorf school, a new approach to education that works to instill in students an ethical responsibility toward others and to integrate a student’s intellectual, artistic, and spiritual life in a holistic way. The school grew and flourished, and there are now Waldorf schools all around the world. Some time ago, the Atlantic Monthly ran an article about one school in California that decided to use the Waldorf model to teach juvenile offenders and as a result, has had a much higher success rate at changing the lives of their students than the public educational system has had. When the author of the article looked at the possible reasons for the success of the Waldorf model, the author came to the conclusion that the positive outcomes were due primarily to the way Waldorf teachers had been trained to think about their students.

“Thousands of times I’ve sat with teachers [in the public school system,]” the author wrote, “and heard them say, ‘I want to kill Johnny,’ or ‘I can’t wait till I get home and can have a glass of wine.’ At Waldorf [schools] they say, ‘How can we help little Ronnie who is, you know, killing puppies right now?’” [\(1\)](#)

It doesn’t take Waldorf training to have that kind of dedication to one’s students — we have a lot of teachers in this congregation who are just as insistent on helping even the most troubled kids — and yet unflagging hope and compassion that remains steadfast even in the face of the most extreme challenges is difficult to maintain and the Waldorf teachers have the advantage of having that attitude baked right into the system. There is an entire community behind them that supports their efforts at demonstrating unconditional love toward each and every child in their classroom. Teachers not in the Waldorf system have to fight society’s attitude that love is not unconditional but is a commodity to be earned. Society treats love as something to be given in exchange for something we want, namely in this case, good behavior, and when love isn’t working and we aren’t getting the results we desire, society will put love aside and choose another tool that will buy the behavior we want. Maybe punishing the delinquent will make him change, society says, or maybe shaming her will make her change. Whether in our schools or in our society at large, we think of love as just one of many commodities that we have on the market which we can use to buy the kind of people we want and if love isn’t working, we cast it aside for another tool.

On Christmas, we celebrate the birth of Christ singing, “Love came down at Christmas,” and during this time of year, we all enjoy talking about God’s love because the Christmas story is all about cute shepherds, and stars, and donkeys braying in a rustic stable, and a little baby lying in a manger. The love that our Christmas celebrations present to us is a Hallmark card sort of love that has a lot of lovable characters. However, once the calendar has turned its page to January and the decorations are put away, God’s love doesn’t stop, and that’s a problem for us. That child that lay in a manger grows into a man and it is no longer shepherds and magi that he is welcoming into his presence, but it is sinners and

scoundrels. Jesus invites the despised to his table. He eats with the unclean and dirty, with the crooks and the cheats. He compassionately washes the feet of the man he knows is about to betray him. He tells us that we should love everyone, even our enemies and then proves it by forgiving his executioners from the cross. That kind of love goes far beyond the idea of love as a commodity. It is a love altogether different, and the extent of that love disturbs us. We are okay with the idea that God's love can be given to storybook characters like shepherds and magi, but do we really think that God's love is extended to Nicolas Cruz who shot and killed 17 people at a school in Parkland, Florida? What about Derek Chauvin who kneeled on the neck of George Floyd until he died? Does God love him? And when we are being honest with ourselves, the question that troubles us is not "does" God love these people, but *should* God love these people? Should God love the terrorist who blew up hundreds of people in a suicide bombing? Should God love the abuser who hurt dozens of little girls? Should God love the con men, the manipulators, the liars, and the thieves? Should God love the person who hurt you? Maybe God *can* love these people, but we wonder why God would want to? What good does it do for God to love the irredeemable?

And our questions reveal that we are still thinking of love as a commodity; that we are assuming that the reason that God loves is because God has discovered that love is a useful technique with good statistical outcomes. The problem with this way of thinking is that it suggests that if God discovers love isn't working, God will toss love aside and try something else. This is, in fact, what some churches preach: they say that God will try love to save you but if you don't respond to love, God will threaten you with damnation to see if God can scare you straight. And if you still don't respond, God will throw you into the burning fires of hell for eternity to use your example as a tool to frighten others into heaven. These churches believe that God is only loving when it is useful to love, but that God can and will turn off the love at any time it stops being useful.

I do not believe, however, that God is *loving*; I believe that God *is* love. Let me say that again so that you hear it right. I do not believe that God is *loving*; I believe that God *is* love and that little change in words makes all of the difference in our faith.

Imagine for a moment, that you asked a potter to shape a cup for you but gave no specifications about the cup's shape or size. The potter might mold a tall slender cup for you or a squat round cup. The cup might have a fancy handle, or fluting around the lip, and it might be blue or red or purple with pink polka dots. The potter could design that cup in a thousand different ways, but the one thing the potter could not do is take the clay and smash it out as flat as a pancake and call it a cup. No matter what it looks like, a cup by definition has to at least hold water or else it is not a cup.

The letter of I John says, "God is love." I John doesn't say, "God is loving;" as if love is one of many of God's attributes; it says "God is love." The Bible doesn't say, "God is loving when it is a useful strategy to be loving, but not so much when love isn't working;" it says, "God is love."

I don't know what God looks like: I don't know if God is tall and slender or squat and round; I don't know if God is blue or red or purple with pink polka dots. I don't honestly know if God has substance and is a being with a mind like ours or if God is something so different from anything we know that we cannot even begin with our limited human minds to imagine the form of God; but I know this, because Christ has taught us this and shown us this with his life: God *is* love. And what that means is that God cannot *not* love, because if God didn't love, then by very definition God wouldn't be God. That's just the kind of God that God is.

And I might add, that's just the kind of God we are stuck with, because honestly, it's not always easy worshipping a God who *is* love. There are times when I'd much rather have a God who can turn love on and off because that kind of God might be willing to give me a break at times and say, "Yeah, loving that person is pretty tough and doesn't seem to be making much of a difference, so you can just go back to hating them." Frankly, there are times when I even I wish I could believe in a vengeful God because there are a few people that my feeble human heart yearns to see burning in the flames of hell, but I don't believe in hell because I believe that God is love which means that condemning people to eternal torment would be antithetical to the very definition of God. If there is a hell then God cannot be God because God is love.

We are stuck with a God who is love from the beginning to the end, and as annoying as that might be trying to follow that God and live up to my calling as a disciple of Christ, I am actually very thankful that this is the kind of God God is, because it is the perfection of God's love that gives me hope. God may not love us because God has chosen it as the best tool to save us, but that doesn't mean that such a deep and abiding love can't produce change. Jesus went all the way to the cross to prove that nothing can stop God's love, and then he rose again to remind us that such steadfast unconditional power can bring us all new life.

God is love and so God can do nothing but love us. With the apostle Paul, I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, not even our own sinful selves, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord, because that's just the kind of God God is.

And for me, that is incredibly good news of great joy for all the people. This is the good news of Christmas.

Footnotes:

1. <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1999/09/schooling-imagination/309180/>