

# PERFECT LOVE

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**1 JOHN 4:7-21**

**LETHBRIDGE MENNONITE CHURCH**

**BY: RYAN DUECK**

**JANUARY 11, 2015/1<sup>ST</sup> SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY**

I want to begin with an apology of sorts to those involved in this Sunday's worship and bulletin preparations. I am not in the habit of changing my mind about sermon topics on Friday afternoon and I very much appreciate everyone's flexibility as I altered the theme and texts of our morning worship very late in the week!

As has already been mentioned, this morning's sermon was not the one that I originally intended to preach today.

I had a sermon prepared from Psalm 105 and 106. It was a decent sermon, I thought. It was to focus on memory and what it means to remember well as people God. It would have been a good January kind of sermon, when many of us are still thinking about fresh starts and looking back in order to look ahead.

And then, on Wednesday, the world's attention was shockingly drawn to Paris, France, where armed men stormed into the offices of *Charlie Hebdo*, a satirical newspaper, and murdered twelve people, including editors, cartoonists, guests, and maintenance workers.

The motivation for this crime was, ostensibly, an attempt to avenge the prophet Mohammed. *Charlie Hebdo* was famous for its irreverent and offensive cartoons, often aimed at Muslims, but also directed toward Jews, Christians, and other political figures.

There was little to admire, in my view, about the work that *Charlie Hebdo* did—it was deliberately inflammatory and offensive and often simply in very poor taste.

But the idea that people could be killed for pictures that they drew shocked me, shocked you, no doubt, and shocked the world.

Like many, I was glued to my computer as the events transpired, as the shooters were eventually killed by police.

Since the events of Wednesday, I have read dozens of articles from a wide variety of perspectives, offering commentary on Wednesday.

Nearly all are saddened. Many are angry, arguing for the tightening of restrictions on immigration among other things. Others are urging for restraint, fearing the backlash that will come toward Muslims, or religious people in general.

The events of Wednesday—and we should remember that the events in Paris was not the only bad news... There were 37 people were killed in a bomb in Yemen on that same day, yesterday brought the horrific news of mass slaughter of innocents by Boko Haram in Nigeria...

These events, among others, have made many people more anxious about “the other.”

We see rising Islamophobia in Europe and around the world. We see far right wing political parties gaining traction in a handful of European countries. We hear comments from neighbours and colleagues about “those people.” Perhaps we have our own private suspicions, too.

Many wonder when we will see similar events here in Canada, when similar sentiments will bubble over the surface of our thin veneer of tolerance and respect.

### **What do we, as followers of Jesus have to say about this?**

How ought we to live in light of these global realities? What ought our contribution be to conversations, whether around dinner tables or water coolers, or in the public sphere in general?

### **How do we deal with difference? How *should* we deal with difference?**

These were the questions on my mind this week. Perhaps they have been on your mind this week, as well.

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When I heard of the news on Wednesday and as I followed it to its conclusion on Friday, my instinctive response was to murmur three words under my breath that I almost always say whenever something terrible happens.

*Christ have mercy.*

But for many people in our world today, it is precisely Christ or Moses or Mohammad or Buddha or whoever else that is the problem! All these religions claiming that they have the truth!

All these religious people who refuse to tolerate difference!

After all, is it not in *Christ's* name that evil has *also* been done throughout history and even in the present? Are not the claims of Christ—or at least of his followers—equally divisive in a world destroying itself over difference? Would not Christ and any other exclusive religious figure be better off left out of things altogether?

Come to think of it, we who claim the name of Christ can't even live very well with difference amongst *ourselves!* The existence of thousands of different Christian churches is evidence enough, is it not? We can't agree about this or that point of theological doctrine or practice, so we split.

(Incidentally, this is one of the most wonderful things about our Epiphany Scripture Readers Exchange... It is so great to participate in the worship services of other denominations as one small sign that the One who unites is far greater than the things that we divide ourselves over!)

And of course, we know that even *within* denominations there is difference! Our own Mennonite denomination currently contains *deep* divisions about homosexuality—divisions that have many feeling apprehensive and fearful about the future.

As many of you know from reading media reports, last week marked the first time a gay couple was married in a Canadian Mennonite Church (Osler, SK). I talked to one Mennonite pastor in a different part of the country this week who said they had a flood of angry emails in his inbox *the next morning*. He's not alone, I'm sure. I have already heard rumblings of churches leaving provincial or national conferences.

Even we peace-loving Mennonites struggle mightily to deal with difference.

So, given *all of this mess*, all of this unpleasant history, all of our troubles in the present, all of our difficulties with difference whether as Christians or as human beings more generally....

What can *Christ* and those who claim exclusive allegiance to this man possibly have to contribute in a cultural climate where it is precisely the existence of exclusive religious

claims and fanatical adherents to them that is so often thought to be the *cause* of all the violence and conflict and misunderstanding?

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A lot, I think.

The question we must ask, as we sift our way through this week's news, as we look at global political realities, as we think about our own pluralistic nation of Canada, or differences in our own denomination is this:

**How does Jesus deal with difference?**

How *did* Jesus deal with difference? How did he deal with those who he disagreed with? How did he deal with threats and provocations? How did he deal with people and events that could easily and understandably have led to reactions of paranoia, isolationism, and self-righteousness?

What we see in Jesus is a radically different way than the ways that our world and our church is so familiar with.

He did not seek to conquer or compel.

He did not threaten or storm the gates, armed to the teeth.

He did not act in coercive ways, did not demand that his way be acknowledged as superior to others.

He did not take life. Not even from his enemies, from those who wished him great harm. Not even from those who *persistently* and *willfully* misunderstood and slandered him.

Rather, he invited. He touched, embraced, forgave. He astonished with grace.

He loved.

And, of course, he lays down his life for his friends and his enemies.

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Which brings us (finally) to 1 John 4.

***Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God, John says. Whoever does not love does not know God because God is love.***

How should we deal with difference?

We must start where God starts: with love. We must refuse love's opposite, which I am convinced is not *hate* but *fear*.

And we must refuse fear not because of some vague commitment to higher principles like "freedom of expression" or "democracy" or "human rights" or whatever other buzzwords are in vogue. We may have strong convictions about these, but as Christians, these are not our starting point.

**We must refuse fear because we have been taken hold of by the love that is stronger than fear, the love that has existed from the beginning, the perfect love that is the character of God himself.**

We must refuse fear because we know Someone who has promised and who has demonstrated that self-giving love is what conquers hatred and violence and fear.

Because we are convinced that it was love that laid down its life and it was love that rose from the grave, conquering death, making new life possible...

Listen again to John's words:

*There is no fear in love. BUT, perfect love drives out fear... The one who fears is not made perfect in love.*

These are strong words. This is not just a nice bit of poetry. This is a basic truth of what it means to be a follower of Jesus in a world full of division.

If we look at the world through the lens of fear—if we look at,

- The violence of this past week
- Racial and religious tensions in Europe and around the world
- Our sisters and brothers in other denominations or religions
- Those in our own family of faith who hold different views on matters we care about deeply

If we look at any of these realities and have reactions based in fear, mistrust, and suspicion, then *we are not being made perfect in love!*

**Love is how we are made perfect.**

Perfect love drives out fear. Perfect love has no room for fear.

Perfect love refuses to look at people, no matter how dark and incomprehensible their deeds, no matter how frustrating or inconvenient we find them, as categories or “problems” or “issues” or “threats” or *anything other than* human beings created and loved by God who will, like us, one day have to give an account of themselves before God and God alone.

Perfect love is freedom. It has no need to control, manipulate, coerce, be proven right or vindicated. Perfect love can be persecuted, mistreated, misunderstood, and rejected because it is convinced that the future is safe with God.

Because perfect love comes from the God who loves all people perfectly.

Because perfect love is the love made known in Jesus Christ, the one who came full of grace and truth (John 1:14).

The one who, as Paul reminds us in Philippians 2, though he was

in very nature God,  
did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage;

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rather, he made himself nothing  
by taking the very nature of a servant,  
being made in human likeness.

8

And being found in appearance as a man,  
he humbled himself  
by becoming obedient to death—  
even death on a cross!

Perfect love is sacrificial love, costly love, humble, obedient love.

**It is love that entrusts the future not to the partial and self-interested efforts of human beings, but to God.**

And so, as followers of Jesus, the question of how to most faithfully deal with difference—on whatever scale and in whatever context—turns out to have a rather simple answer, as so many questions do when it comes right down to it.

**In a world of difference and division, we are to emulate Jesus, the one Perfect Lover.**

Our world will probably not magically become a more unified and tolerant, less violent and ignorant place in the weeks and months and years ahead. It is difficult to look ahead and see anything but political polarization, reactionary decisions, and religious and racial intolerance in Europe and around the world.

What will we as followers of Jesus contribute to this? Will we partition ourselves off from the dangerous “other” in how we speak and act in the context of difference? Or will we, like Jesus, be a city on a hill, showing the world that we are committed not to seeking our own advantage, but to being made perfect in love?

The global church will probably not magically come to set aside theological and denominational differences in the weeks and months and years ahead.

What will we, as followers of Jesus who have been formed *in* and drawn *to* specific traditions and expressions of faith, contribute to this? Will we emphasize the things that divide us or the things that unite us? Will we celebrate the “big tent” of faith that we are a part of, or will we cloister ourselves off in our own little rooms, congratulating ourselves that we understand and practice what others do not?

Our own national Mennonite church will probably not magically come to perfect unanimity on the question of homosexuality in the weeks and months and years ahead.

How will we live with one another in the context of difference? Will we label and question the orthodoxy of those whose views we don’t share? Will we treat sexual minorities with suspicion and fear? Will we allow this issue to define us rather than our common allegiance to the way of Jesus? Or, will we, like Jesus, “outdo one another in showing honour to each other (Romans 12:10)? Will we live as if we believe what John says at the end of our passage today:

If we do not love a fellow believer, whom we have seen, we cannot love God, whom we have not seen (1 John 4:20).

I am convinced that as followers of the Crucified One, we can and we *must* deal with difference differently than the ways that we are so familiar with, the ways that come instinctively to us as human beings.

We, *of all people*, should be least prone to giving in to fearful, suspicious, and reactionary responses to difference.

As followers of Jesus, we have the unique privilege and gift of being able to participate in the perfect love that drives out fear.

I want to close with a quote from the famous twentieth century Roman Catholic theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar:

Love alone is credible; nothing else can be believed, and nothing else ought to be believed. This is the achievement, the “work” of faith... to believe that there is such a thing as love... and that there is nothing higher or greater than it... The first thing that must strike a non-Christian about the Christian’s faith is that... it is obviously too good to be true: the mystery of being, revealed as absolute love, condescending to wash his creatures’ feet, and even their souls, taking upon himself all the confusion of guilt, all the God-directed hatred, all the accusations showered upon him... all the mocking hostility... in order to pardon his creature.... This is truly too much.<sup>1</sup>

This kind of love *does* seem to good to be true.

But as Christians we are convinced that we are being made perfect in love as we follow the One who showed us what perfect love looks like.

In this world we are like Jesus, John says.

The world and the church, with all the difference and division that both contain, need those who *are* like Jesus to *act* like Jesus.

Amen.



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<sup>1</sup> Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Love Alone is Credible* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 2004), 101-102.