

# Love One Another

1 John 3:16-24

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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Apparently, psychologists have discovered that our musical tastes begin to take shape as early as age thirteen or fourteen and by the time we're in our early twenties these tastes are more or less locked into place.

One study indicated that “popular songs released when you're in your early teens are likely to remain quite popular among your age group for the rest of your life” and that many of us stop listening to new music entirely after around age thirty-three.<sup>1</sup>

This probably explains why I struggle to appreciate the throbbing, migraine inducing electronic music that occasionally drifts up from my son's corner of the basement.

I'll leave you to ponder how well this study reflects your own experience and music tastes. ☺

At any rate, when I was fourteen, one of the hits of the year was a song by Alannah Myles called “Love Is.” It had a catchy guitar riff, a singable tune, a bit of rock and roll swagger. My bar for what made a good song was pretty low back then, and this one rose to it.

Well, mostly. The music was fine. The lyrics? Not so much. The first line of the chorus, delivered in a kind of gravelly snarl, went like this:

Love is... what you want it to be...

I was no theologian at age fourteen, but I must have paid just enough attention in church and in youth group to know that this certainly didn't *sound* right.

Whatever else I knew (or thought I knew) about the word “love” at that highly impressionable stage of life, I knew that it was too big and important and deep and wide to be reduced to my own personal preferences.

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<sup>1</sup> [https://qz.com/quartz/1717718/why-do-older-people-hate-new-music/?fbclid=IwAR3DmPnkQ-tL4MkJXHzkLBC\\_q5uRraiYpZ6axjInX5U5z\\_QcvFN\\_EhNAq9Y](https://qz.com/quartz/1717718/why-do-older-people-hate-new-music/?fbclid=IwAR3DmPnkQ-tL4MkJXHzkLBC_q5uRraiYpZ6axjInX5U5z_QcvFN_EhNAq9Y)

Love *had* to be more than just whatever I wanted it to be.

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It's easy to make fun of a vapid rock and roll song from the late eighties. We probably don't (or shouldn't) expect too much theological profundity from anything on the top 40 charts.

But what *is* love? Is it a feeling? An ethical agenda? A few inspiring verses from the bible? Do we just know love when we see it?

A while back, I got one of those mass emails that contain all kinds of cute children's sayings. These are not usually high on my list of emails to read, but for some reason I opened this one up.

I was a series of responses from 4–8-year-olds to the question, "What is love?"<sup>2</sup> The responses ranged from the hilarious to the quite brilliant. Here are a few.

- "Love is when you go out to eat and give somebody most of your French fries without making them give you any of theirs." (Chrissy, age 6)
- "Love is what makes you smile when you're tired." (Terri, age 4) *And how many of us feel tired these days???*
- "Love is when my mommy makes coffee for my daddy and she takes a sip before giving it to him, to make sure the taste is OK." (Danny, age 7)
- "Love is like a little old woman and a little old man who are still friends even after they know each other so well." (Tommy, age 6)
- "When my grandmother got arthritis, she couldn't bend over and paint her toenails anymore. So, my grandfather does it for her all the time, even when his hands got arthritis too. That's love." (Rebecca, age 8)
- "You really shouldn't say 'I love you' unless you mean it. But if you mean it, you should say it a lot. People forget." (Jessica, age 8)

I like that last one. We are forgetful creatures, certainly. And I suspect few of us tire of hearing the words "I love you."

But we don't just need to *hear* about love. We need to experience it, practice it, grow into it. Love needs to be expressed in actions not just words.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.superkids.com/aweb/pages/humor/060402.sht>

This is one of the central points of our passage from the letter of 1 John this morning. The first three verses offer about as comprehensive an answer to the “what is love” question that you could hope to find in the New Testament:

**This is how we know what love is:** Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for one another. If any one of you has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in you? Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth (1 John 3:16-18).

What John says is nothing short of revolutionary. The truest, deepest, most accurate expression of love is defined by what Christ did on Calvary’s cross. *This is how we know what love is. And this is how we ought to love one another.*

John is no idealist who is still basking in the glow of the events of Jesus’ resurrection and ascension.

This letter was written around half a century after the time of Jesus. Reality has set in. Perhaps Jesus’ followers are coming to realize that he isn’t coming back right away. Their task is to learn how to follow him faithfully in his physical absence.

A half-century is a lot of time to think about how Jesus changes things and what this implies in everyday life. A half-century is also enough time for some strange understandings of Jesus to creep into a community.

There were some false teachers floating around the community to whom John was writing, and the letter was written to address them.

The main problem was that these teachers denied that Jesus had actually come in the flesh, that he wasn’t a real human being—that he had *appeared* to be human but was really only a spirit. The fancy name given to this belief was Docetism.

Docetism was intended to solve a theological problem: If Jesus is God and Jesus died, how can God die?

This teaching was one way of dealing with it: Jesus wasn’t really a flesh-and-blood human being, he just seemed that way. Therefore, he didn’t really die, it just seemed like he did.

John considers this to be a fundamental distortion of the gospel. So did the early church, condemning it as a heresy at the council of Nicaea in 325 AD.

John could have simply attacked the ideas of these teachers. John was a pretty sharp guy. Why not just keep the matter at the doctrinal level of who had the right understanding of Jesus?

Ideas and beliefs *are* important to John. He does spend considerable time refuting the content of the false teaching in this letter.

**But for John the ultimate litmus test for anyone who claims to be a follower of Jesus is this: do we love one another?**

There are a bunch of Greek words that we translate into English as “love.” But the word for love that John uses is probably a fairly well known one: *agape*.

*Agape* is distinguished from other Greek words for love primarily because of its self-sacrificing quality. It is unconditional love that gives without expectation of anything in return.

It is a *fundamentally self-giving love*. It is a *sacrificial* love that seeks the best for and in others, even at great cost to ourselves.

This is how the world will know if what we believe about Jesus is true.

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Well, we live in a different time and place than the church John was writing to. Their issues are not necessarily our issues.

It’s hard to imagine our church agonizing over theological doctrines like the early church. But we still find plenty of things to divide about, don’t we?

On Friday and Saturday, some of us joined the MCA Faith Studies event online. It was led by CMU Professor Emeritus Gerald Gerbrandt and the theme was: “Denominations: Who Needs Them?”

In the first session, Gerald identified a tension that I think all of us feel, at least on some level. We identify with a particular denomination. It’s kind of like our “family of origin” or the place we have found belonging.

But we also know that Jesus prayed that his church would be one. And I don’t think anyone could look at the present Christian landscape of thousands of denominations, each at least on

some level emerging out of conflict and an unwillingness to look past difference, as an expression of oneness.

Indeed, the existence of all these denominations could be interpreted as the church's persistent unwillingness to do love one another in precisely the way that John commands in today's passage.

If the church, throughout history down to the present, had been committed to laying down our lives for one another—even those we disagree with—would all these different denominations exist?

If Christians were more committed to sacrificial love and to putting the needs of others ahead of our own than being right, is this whole history of splitting and hostility and the hardening of boundaries conceivable?

I say all this knowing full well that we are learning to live better with difference. Denominational boundaries are not nearly as inflexible as they used to be.

We have only to think of our refugee sponsorship from a few years ago where we joined hands with our United Church and Anglican and Lutheran friends (and others) for a common cause.

But the human instinct to divide doesn't just go away. I wonder if we have just transferred our suspicion of other denominations to people who don't share our political ideologies.

We may care less about whether someone is a Mennonite or a Catholic than we once did (although I still heard a few comments at the online event about "those MBs"; perhaps family divisions take longest to heal), but we *certainly* care if they are a liberal or a conservative. The lines are different but the psychological and spiritual dynamics are the same.

At one point, Gerald asked us to adopt what I thought was a good spiritual practice in thinking about differences within and between denominations.

He said, "Each one of us should ask, 'Which part of the church do I feel most removed from? Which Christians bug me the most?' And then we should pray for them and move toward them."

I don't know who would fit in your category of "Christians who bug me the most." Maybe it's conservative fundamentalists who oppose vaccinations. Maybe it's super woke liberal Christians who see a microaggression behind what you think are harmless ways of speaking.

Maybe it's the people who have the wrong views about sexuality or gender or race. Maybe it's the climate change deniers. Maybe it's the mushy liberals whose faith is indistinguishable from political activism. Maybe it's the Christians who are too hierarchical or don't share our views about peace and justice or whose worship styles seem too focused on entertainment.

I'm sure each one of us has our own corner of the church that we are embarrassed about and would prefer to ignore (or worse).

Christians have never lacked for things to disagree and divide over, sadly. I am convinced that our inability to love one another well in spite of our differences remains one of the biggest hindrances to the witness of the body of Christ.

I want to be clear: the command to love those we disagree with does not mean that we cannot disagree, even vigorously. There are many important issues which Christians have differing opinions about. Some Christians really do have some fairly crazy ideas about things (in my opinion) and there is a time and a place to challenge them.

But our shared baptism, our shared faith in Christ Jesus, our common participation at the Lord's table should matter far more than our political opinions or our take on current social issues.

A fundamentalist conservative Christian and a left-wing progressive Christian ought to have more in common in their shared loyalty to Christ than to those who share their political views.

Sadly, this is too rarely the case. Too often, we come to church expecting it to reflect our politics and to never challenge them.

We retain a certain disdain for those "other Christians" who don't think rightly about all our preferred issues. We consign them to the realm of outer darkness. We're glad Jesus loves them because we have little interest in doing so!

I realize that some of you might be squirming right now. I hope so. Because I certainly am. I am very well acquainted with the tendencies I am speaking of because they are my own.

I am far more comfortable in conversation with Christians across denominations, with agnostics and atheists who share some of my moral concerns, etc. than I am with Christians whose theology I don't like.

Yet, Jesus could hardly put it more plainly:

“If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners love those who love them. And if you do good to those who are good to you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners do that (Luke 6:32-33).

Or, to quote Nikka, age 6, from that mass email that I mentioned earlier:

“If you want to learn to love better, you should start with a friend whom you hate.”

Boundary-crossing, sacrificial love is who we are as Christians. At least it’s supposed to be.

And this is not an optional component of the Christian life. It is not just a nice ideal we should aspire to, or something we should say we admire. It’s not something we should really get around to someday. It’s not something for the “super-Christians.”

Christ-like *agape* love is who we are as followers of Jesus. Love, more than anything we say we believe, defines us.

I conclude with the words of John, later in his letter:

Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God because God is love.

And later, 4:19-21:

We love because he first loved us. If we say we love God yet hate a brother or sister, we are liars. For if we do not love a fellow believer, whom we have seen, we cannot love God whom we have not seen. And he has given us this command: Those who love God must love one another.

This is our mandate. This is our calling. This is *who we are*.

May God help us to be a people who love, not only in word or speech, but in truth and action.

Amen.

