

No “Ifs”, “Ands” or “Buts”

I John 4: 7-12

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First Federated Church

Peoria, Illinois

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(SERMON NOTES)

Text: God is love. (4:8b)

I come to this Sunday with a bit of fear and trembling. A lot is happening today and I know that there will be a few furtive glances at watches. That always makes me nervous but as a parishioner said to me years ago, “Don’t worry. If you can’t spend more than an hour worshipping God once a week then you are too busy! I’m also a bit apprehensive because of an old joke that goes around clergy circles this time of year. The story is told of three pastors who were trying to get rid of bats that would swoop down through the sanctuary at worship. The first pastor said that the church’s trustees decided to put poison. The bats ate the poison and died but the stench was worse than the bats themselves. The second pastor said that the custodian, who was an excellent marksman, decided to shoot the bats but that caused quite an uproar when he hit one of their Tiffany stained glass windows! The third pastor looked sympathetically upon the other two pastors. “Well,” the pastor said. “We put out humane bat traps, trapped the bats, brought them to worship one Sunday, baptized and confirmed them and we haven’t seen them since!” Hopefully what is true of bats is not true of confirmands. I don’t believe that it will be.

I don’t know what you learned in your confirmation class; maybe a little church history; maybe the books of the Bible. You may have memorized the Lord’s Prayer or the Apostles’ Creed. If you remember nothing else, though, I want you to remember one thing, today’s text.

God is love. Would you say that with me? *God is love.* Would the congregation repeat it? *God is love.*

One of the greatest theologians of the 20th century is a man named Karl Barth. He died several years ago but in his lifetime he wrote a fourteen volume work of theology called Church Dogmatics. You can buy a set, by the way, currently on sale for only \$460. The price has been reduced from \$720!

In 1962, only a half dozen years before his death, while on a visit to the United States he was asked if he could summarize all that he had written. The audience gasped at the suggestion that a million word work could be easily summarized. Barth thought for a moment, though, before smiling. “Yes,” he replied, “in the words of a song that my mother used to sing to me. ‘Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so.’”

One of the great skeptics and philosophers of the 20th century, Bertrand Russell, at the age of 94 once said, he had discovered at the end of his life that the meaning of Universe can be summed up in a word that he first heard at his mother’s knee in his native Wales. That one word? Love.

If you remember nothing else, remember this; *God is love.*

God’s love is unconditional. There are not strings attached. That is hard for us to believe because everything has a string attached. There is no such thing as a free lunch, right? Well, if the First Epistle of John is to be believed, if it is right, God’s love comes with no strings attached, with no “ifs,” “ands” or “buts.”

God doesn't love you *IF* you are good; *if* you behave, *if* you make the honor roll, *if* you make a lot of money, *if* you go to church, *if* you are kind, *if* your appreciate what God has done for you, *if* you are sincere, *if* you are obedient. There are *no* "ifs" with God's love.

There are no "ands" with God's love, either. The writer doesn't say "God loves you *and*..." God loves you *and* remember that God is righteous. God loves you *and* God is holy. God loves you *and* God is wrathful. God loves you *and* God is judging. I John doesn't put in any "ands". .

Nor are there any "buts". According to I John God doesn't say "I love you *but* don't make me angry," "I love you *but* don't make me angry," "I love you *but* don't ignore me", "I love you *but* don't cross me", "I love you *but* don't" whatever you wish to insert.

God's love is unconditional. The apostle Paul really struggled with this in his own life. I think that we all do. It is so alien to us. We just can't put our little minds around it. Yet, instinctively Paul knew that God's love was unconditional. In his First Letter to the Corinthians he wrote about this amazing love. It is a passage that many couples include on their wedding day.

Love never gives us. Love cares more for others than for self. Love doesn't want what it doesn't have. Love doesn't strut, (it) doesn't have a swelled head, (it) doesn't force itself on others, (it) isn't always "me first," (it) doesn't fly off the handle, (it) doesn't keep score, (it) revel when others grovel. (It) takes pleasure in the flowering of truth, (it) puts up with anything, (it) trusts God always, (it) always looks for the best, (it) never looks back, and (it) keeps going to the end. (The Message, I C. 13: 7, 8)

A few years later the apostle Paul wrote once again about this "God love". *Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?...No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8: 35, 37-38)*

God is love. This love is witnessed to us this morning when we celebrate the sacrament of baptism and communion. In baptism we are reminded that we belong to God even before we realize to whom we belong. We belong to God and are loved by God not because of what we have or have not or because of who we are. It is not about *who* we are but *Whose* we are. In communion we reminded that God walks with us throughout life's journey, from the highest mountaintop to the deepest, darkest valley, even to the valley of the shadow of death and beyond.

So, if you remember nothing else, what is the one thing that I want you to remember? God is love. Amen.

(The Late Elam Davies gave me this insight on God's love in the early 1980s)