

NATIONAL COMMUNITY CHURCH

February 28, 2021

Beloved _ Incomprehensible

Pastor Heather Zempel

"Beloved, let us love one another for love is from God and everyone that loves is born of God and knows God. Anyone who does not love doesn't know God for God is (come on, say it with me) love." God is love. I mean, we know that but do we really know that? Do we get that? Can we comprehend that idea that God is love?

It is so good to be with you today to those of you that are in the room. Yes, we can celebrate that. And to all of you that are joining on our online campus around the world we are so glad to be with you wherever you're watching. This weekend, we're in a series called 'Beloved', beloved, be loved. Pastor Mark teed it up for us two weekends ago, at state of the church. Pastor Joshua kicked us off last weekend. As a spiritual family we are pursuing together Dr. King's vision of becoming a beloved community. "Beloved, let us love one another." We find this in the book of 1 John. It is a letter that John wrote. John was a disciple of Jesus. He also wrote the gospel of John. He wrote two other letters. He wrote the book of Revelation, and it's not surprising that he uses the word, beloved, because he saw himself as that. He saw himself as the one that was loved by Jesus. In fact, the other gospel writers will write things like Peter and John went fishing, Peter and John went to the tomb. And John just writes, Peter and the disciple that Jesus loved, went fishing. Peter and the disciple that Jesus loved, went to the tomb, what if we all just did that? You know, like, Ryan and I had lunch today? Nah, Ryan and the disciple that Jesus loved had lunch today. Pastor Mark and Pastor Heather had a meeting today. Uh-uh Pastor Mark and the disciple that Jesus loved had a meeting today.

John calls his congregations, around, Ephesus beloved. And he's writing to a group of people that are wrestling with relational conflict and theological division. And he writes, to remind them of some of Jesus' last words and last teachings that he gave between the gospel of John chapters 13 to 17. And here's something I want to ask you to do this week, I'm going to ask you to do it, because we don't have time to do it in our time together today. But at some point this week, I want you to read the gospel of John chapters 13, to 17 and the book of first John, or this letter, this poetic sermon, side by side, because it addresses the same themes. They are echoes of one another, that God is love that we are the beloved of God, and we are called to be an expression of His love to the world around us. But here's the deal, I don't want you to just read the words. I want you to let the words read you. I want you to put yourself under these words of Jesus that are then echoed by his disciple, John and meditate on them and chew on them. Let them soak into your heart and your mind and your spirit because the love of God is much better experienced than explained.

But let's try to explain a few things today. So 1 John, chapter four, verse seven, the New Living Translation says it this way, "⁷ Dear friends, let us continue to love one another, for love comes from God. Anyone who loves is a child of God and knows God. ⁸ Anyone who does not love does not know God, for God is love."

Now, when I was four years old, my Sunday school teacher, Mrs. Horton had this massive big Bible that had colorful bookmarks all through it. And on Sunday morning, she would call one of us up to pull on one of those bookmarks and read the verse for the day. Now in reality she called us up, we pull the bookmark, she whispers, the verse in our ear, and then we are able to stand up proudly and proclaim it. And I remember the first verse; I remember reading was "God is love." I'm so thankful for parents, and for Sunday school teachers, that embedded the Word of God in me and not just the Word of God, but a love for the Word of God. And I've got to say today how thankful I am for NCC kids who have kept church going for my kid, and they don't just make church happen they make it fun. God is love.

Now, I want to say this when John says, anyone who does not love does not know God, like, that's kind of a bummer in this passage. Like everything's going great, you know, "Beloved, let us love one another for love comes from God. Anyone who loves is born of God knows God and if you don't love you don't know God." I think what we have got to understand here is that this is not John, throwing down the gauntlet, so that we can prove our love. John's not making this like a litmus test for our love. Rather, he is saying, this is the natural progression. It's the natural evolution of transformation that occurs in our hearts when we are radically changed by an encounter and an understanding of our belovedness in the love of God. And that that we can't help but have love explode to the world around us. God is love.

A.W. Tozer said what comes to mind when you think about God is the most important thing about you. I want to take Tozer a little bit further and ask this, "What comes to mind when you hear God is love?" Because here's what I think some of us do. I think some of us hear God is love and in our minds, we translate that to God is nice. That God is really nice. Man that Jesus was a really nice guy. Jesus said such nice things and he did such nice things and he said such nice things. We need to be more like Jesus. We just need to be a little bit nicer.

We do not need more nice in our world. See we have reduced God is love to God is nice. And what that does is we don't need nice we need what Pastor Joshua talked about last weekend, we need goodness and we need mercy and we need gentleness and we need kindness and we need love and that is so much better than niceness. We've got to understand that when God is love, it means he is not just nice. And it doesn't mean that he just loves or he just does loving things. He is the essence of, the embodiment of, the fullness of, the expression of, he is love, and there's no way we will ever be able to comprehend this. We've got to go to this thing, this divine mystery, the doctrine of the Trinity to come even close to comprehending it, this idea that God exists three in one, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

A couple of weeks ago, Pastor Mark said it this way, "This is a profound theological truth, unity in diversity." The Beloved Community is embodied by the Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one God, three persons. We see this throughout the text of Scripture. *"In the beginning,"* Genesis 1:26, *"let us make man in our image to be like us."* He speaks of himself in the plural. Luke 1:35 we get to the annunciation and we read that the angel tells Mary, *"The Holy Spirit will come on you, the power of the Most High will overshadow you and he will be called the Son of God."* At the baptism of Jesus the Spirit descends upon him and the father speaks from heaven, *"This is my beloved Son in whom I'm well pleased."* When Paul writes to the church at Corinth, he gives them a blessing of benediction. He says, *"May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all."* We see in these passages, every person of the Trinity showing up and playing a role that is unique and is distinct and yet they walk together in inseparable unity and oneness. And that is completely incomprehensible. And yet it's because of that, that His love is infinite because the Father loves the Son, and the son loves the Spirit, and the Spirit loves the Father. And they exist together in this continuous loop of never ending love for one another. God is inherently relational, his very nature exists in community and that's what makes this love infinite.

And I want to share something that I believe is specifically for someone watching this today. And I have been praying for you since Wednesday morning. There is someone who the enemy of your soul has allowed you to have a mindset of scarcity, when it comes to the love of God. You believe that God is love and you believe that God loves some people, and maybe you even believe God has a little bit of love every now and then for you. But you have not been able to embrace that God loves you. And I want to say to you today that the Holy Spirit is speaking to you and saying, "Get rid of that mindset of scarcity and let the mindset of abundance take hold. Let God be God in your life because his love is unlimited. It is unobstructed. It is infinite, and there is more than enough for you." Is that incomprehensible? Absolutely. Is it impossible? Never when the cross and the empty tomb are at play. And that's a great little place for us to segue.

All right, I'm off my notes. 1 John 4:9, let's keep going. ⁹ *God showed how much he loved us by sending his one and only Son into the world so that we might have eternal life through him.* ¹⁰ *This is real love—not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as a sacrifice to take away our sins."*

So God is love. He exists in the Trinity. He exists in community. He is love. But it doesn't stop there. He demonstrated his love to us. He showed us what love looked like. And here's what we've got to understand when Jesus demonstrated his love to us it was not a good feeling he had about us. It was not a positive thought he had about us. It was not a complimentary statement he made about us. It was an action he took for our highest good. It was an action he took on our behalf. It echoes Romans 5:8 here when it says, *"But God demonstrated his love for us and while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us."* Love is not an emotion. It is not a sentiment. It is not an expression of a preference of one thing a little bit over another. It is choosing someone else's

highest good. It is going against your own preferences. It is sacrifice and it will cost us something.

Jesus left his place at the right hand of the Father. He wrapped himself in the skin of his own creation. He submitted himself to the care of his own creation and ultimately surrendered himself to the violence that had overtaken his creation. That's the kind of love that is rooted in the humility that Pastor Joshua talked about last weekend and that, to me, is incomprehensible.

And then Jesus is hanging on a Roman cross. The Romans took crucifixion and perfected it to intensify the pain. It was the most brutal and degrading form of capital punishment in the ancient world. It was designed in order to inflict the greatest amount of pain, to exact punishment, but also to bring shame upon the one hanging there. And so Jesus is hanging on this cross, before his creation. And he's been beaten within a millimeter of his life. He's stripped completely naked before the world. Insults are hurled at him. And the gospel of John tells us that he looks down from the cross and he sees his mother and he sees the disciple that Jesus loved, which we know must be John. And he says, "*Woman, behold your son. Son behold your mother.*" At a moment of excruciating pain, and agony, Jesus is making sure that the people he cares about the most are going to take care of one another. This kind of love is inconceivable.

And then three days later, love exploded out of the grave, because this was a type of love, that the grave could not hold on to that death could not contain that sin could not stand in front of. It is a love that is inconceivable that is incomprehensible, and it is uncontainable. He demonstrated his love towards us.

Verse 11, ¹¹ *Dear friends, since God loved us that much, we surely ought to love each other.* ¹² *No one has ever seen God. But when we love each other, God lives in us, and his love is brought to full expression in us."*

God is love. He demonstrated his love on the cross, and then we demonstrate God to the world, when we love each other. Since God loved us that much, we surely ought to love each other. This is the responsibility that God has given us in the world.

A lot of times when we talk about salvation, we think about it in very individualistic terms. And we think about it as having kind of a past tense, and a future tense that we were saved at one point in the past, to secure us a certain future tense reality. But that's not all that it was understood to be in the ancient world. In the world of Jesus, that was not the whole of salvation. Salvation was not about a past tense decision to secure a future tense destination. It was about the work that God was doing presently, and continuously and corporately in his world to bring his kingdom come and his will be done on earth, as it is in heaven. It's about him inviting us to participate with him, and showing his love to the world around us. And in that we are not just saved from something we are saved for something to bring the full expression of the love of God into the world.

Now, how are we going to do that? I don't think it's going to happen by us just being a little bit nicer to one another. And here's the deal, sometimes nice, is the problem because we can use nice to mask, to charade, to hide the deeper issues of anger and hatred and division that are down to you below the surface. And every good Southern woman knows that that is sometimes what is lurking behind that phrase, bless their hearts. Love means deferring our preferences for someone else. Love means taking very risky steps that sometimes feel very unsafe in order to have the vulnerability that it takes to love one another well.

In the book *The Deeply Formed Life* Rich Villodas talks about growing up in Brooklyn. And he talks about being in this very international and multiracial environment where the neighborhood is filled with Puerto Ricans and Dominicans and Jamaicans and African Americans. And he said that while there was tension between those groups, that the greatest display of violence was often directed at the Chinese takeouts and the Korean dry cleaners. It was a violence against Asian Americans that is still continuing today and sadly, I am just now becoming aware of. And I'm so grateful for my Asian American friends that will sit with me at my table and help me understand and talk to me about fact and feeling that are involved in that. But Rich talks about going into this dry cleaner, and from the time he could remember for weeks as a young boy, he would go into the dry cleaners, and there was this very, very thick, clear, but solid bulletproof partition between the workers and the customers. And so Rich would come in and he would drop his dry cleaning into the chute and then talk through this partition to the owners with his instructions. And he said he did this for weeks, for years, decades and then, at some point, after a couple of decades of this experience, he walked in to the dry cleaners one day and the partition was gone. And it was so unsettling to him and unnerving he assumed he was in the wrong place, he'd come in the wrong door. And when he realized no, this is the right place he mentioned to the new owner that it just looks so different. And the new owner said, he said that, "We wanted to build trust with our neighbors. We wanted to build trust with our neighbors." Rich later found out that these new owners were followers of Jesus. And they had been gripped with this compelling vision that they couldn't let go of, of a new community, of a new neighborhood that was built not around suspicion and mistrust and fear but a community that was built on goodness, and trust, and hospitality.

So you think we know instinctively that in order to love another in order to be an expression of love to defer our preferences, it just means that we've got to lay down our weapons. But it also means that we have to let down the guard that we have placed in front of us and that is the hardest work to do.

Guys, look, when there is a group of people, when there is a person that is at greatest risk of harm, of hurt, of injury, and we see them willing to let their guard down for the sake of unity we had better be ready and willing to rush in to stand with them, to stand by them, to stand for them. Rich talks about the moment that he reached across the counter for the first time ever to shake the hands of those on the other side. And it is that kind of locked arms solidarity that we have got to be willing to extend to people if we are ever going to be the full expression of the love of God

to the world around us. Rich said this, (if I can get back on my notes) "The cross of Christ isn't just a bridge that gets us to God. It's a sledgehammer that breaks down the walls that separate us."

Two weeks ago, Pastor Mark talked about the high priestly prayer of Jesus that on the night that Jesus was going to the cross he begins to pray for his disciples on a night that he could have, understandably unarguably have been concerned about nothing other than his own welfare. He's praying for his disciples, and then he expands it and broadens it and he begins to pray for all those who will come after them.

John 17 verse 20, *"My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message,²¹ that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me."*

Jesus going to the cross is praying for you and praying for me in 2021 DC and praying that we will be one. And he takes it all the way back to this one incomprehensible idea of the Trinity. *"Father as I'm in you and you are in me. May they be in us and they be one that they be the full expression of the love of God to the world."* This was Jesus dying wish, his dying prayer, and we've been invited in to participate. It sounds a lot like John 13:35, *"I'm giving you a new commandment to love one another. Your love for one another will prove to the world that you are my disciples."*

Francis Schaeffer called this oneness, the final apologetic. Apologetics is a branch of theology that seeks to build proofs, rational, logical, indestructible proofs about different things of faith, the historicity of Jesus, the validity of the Scripture, the existence of God. And it's all stuff I really love. As an engineer, I love building proofs that you know, are indestructible. But at the end of the day, the most compelling the most enduring, the most convincing, the most indestructible proof for the existence of God is the incomprehensible love that his followers have for one another, from every nation, tribe, tongue, people. It's our love for one another that proves to the world that Jesus is who he says he was and that he's still alive and at work in the world today.

Dr. Tony Evans said this, "All of the praying, preaching, worship or Bible studies in the world can never bring about the fullest possible manifestation of God's presence, like functioning in a spirit of oneness in the body of Christ." You see, we like to give reasons. We like to give experiences. We like to make arguments. But I don't know a single person who fell in love with Jesus because they lost an argument. People fall in love with Jesus, because they're given a picture that's irresistible.

Let me give you an example. If I want to make you fall in love with my five year old kid, Sawyer I don't go to listing her accomplishments or telling you even her most recent joke, which is always pitiful, or telling you what her grades are, or talking about her very impressive lineage. I don't give you arguments for reasons of why you should love my kid. I just pull out my phone

and I show you this. And I just hope when you see that, that I see, you see the same thing I do. You see a picture that is irresistible, that you can't really explain, but it just makes you fall in love. My question is this, what pictures of God are we showing to the world because it is not about reason. It is not about argument. It's not even about experiences. It is about showing people a picture that is irresistible, and incomprehensible and inconceivable and uncontainable about the love of God. Can we show pictures to the world of God's love that shouts the truth that God is alive and working in the world today? Can we give pictures of God's love to the world that are inconceivable and unimaginable and unfathomable but also irresistible? Can we give pictures of the love of God to the world that cannot be explained unless God really is at work?

I'm going to invite the band to come back in a moment we're going to celebrate communion. Communion is that place at the foot of the cross where the ground is level, where we lock arms together in solidarity as those that have been changed by the love of Jesus. And as we prepare to do that, I want to extend a couple of different invitations to you today. The first is an invitation of recognition of your belovedness. You may just need to if only for a moment grasp that you are loved by God. No ifs, no ands, no buts, you are loved by God. And if that's you here today, I tell you what I'm going to, if you're on our online campus, I want you to hit the live prayer button right now. You don't really need to hear anything else I have to say. Hit that live free button and let one of our prayer team pray with you, and lavish the love of God on you.

If you are here, live at the Turnaround, if you would be so bold, to just kind of lift your hand up a little bit, you just say I need to know my belovedness. I need to be reminded of my belovedness. I need to experience my belovedness. And if you see someone around you with their hand lifted, would you just extend an arm towards them right now and pray that they would experience the love of God.

Secondly, I want to extend an invitation of repentance. If you've never had that moment, where you have met Jesus at the cross, and you have come to a place where you bend your knee to his lordship, and you say, "Sign me up for being a part of this mission to extend your love to the world." If you're a part of our online campus, I want to invite you to hit that raise hand button. And we say, "Welcome to the family." We say, "We are so excited to have you here." And I'll tell you what, if you're here in our live location, we've got a baptism tank set up back here in the back. We can just do this tonight.

Third invitation I want to make is, and this is for all of us, this is about resolve. This is about resolving to be the expression of the love of God in the world. And this is not going to happen overnight it is a journey. It is a journey of three minutes of conversation here, of two minutes of going out of our way to show hospitality there; five minutes of just listening not to respond but to understand. Resolve to be the full expression of the love of God to the world.

Holy Spirit, help us. Holy Spirit, make us one. Holy Spirit, make us a demonstration of love for which you are the only explanation