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Today we come to the fourth week of exploring 1st John, written more like an essay or sermon than a letter to the early church. We heard the author use images of light, emphasize love, and offer reassurance that Jesus is real. The author reminded us that everyone has sinned, along with the reassurance that through confession God will offer forgiveness. Last week we heard John's warning to "test the spirits," for some people were teaching that Jesus was only a spirit and was not human. John emphasized that God's love came in human form to live among us, to embody God's loving presence among us.

And if we didn't get the point during the first portion of John's writings, this week he really drives the idea home about God's loving nature. I remember the first time I encountered this passage about love from the fourth chapter. It was during my college years as I was struggling to understand what it meant to be a follower of Jesus. One campus group urged me show God's love by sharing four spiritual laws with other students and getting them

to believe and accept them, though when I began having conversations with people and listening to their struggles, I realized that faith was more complicated than four simple steps.

And then I came across 1 John. I still remember sitting in the lobby of the dorm where several of us gathered for a Bible study and I read: "let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God...since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another." That made sense to me—our love comes from God's love.

The next few verses caught my attention: "No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us...those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen...those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also."

A light bulb went off in my head: to be a follower of Jesus means I show love to others. In addition to the words I speak, loving others has to

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do with how I live my life. I decided that being a Christian was not so much about believing four laws—it was about living a loving life.

It appears from the author's writing in this passage in the Bible that the early church was also struggling to understand the meaning of love, and I imagine that each of us at some point in our lives has struggled with this question.

What is love, and how does one express it? A group of children ages 5 to 10 were asked about the meaning of love, and here's a few of their responses:¹

- "If falling in love is anything like learning how to spell, I don't want to do it. It takes too long." *Glenn, age 7*
- "Love is like an avalanche where you have to run for your life." *John, age 9*
- "I think you're supposed to get shot with an arrow or something, but the rest of it isn't supposed to be so painful." *Manuel, age 8*
- "No one is sure why it happens, but I heard it has something to do with how you smell.

That's why perfume and deodorant are so popular." *Mae, age 9*

- "I'm not rushing into being in love. I'm finding fourth grade hard enough." *Regina, age 10*
- "Lovers will just be staring at each other and their food will get cold. Other people care more about the food." *Brad, age 8*
- "Don't forget your wife's name. That will mess up the love." *Erin, age 8*

One little girl suggested how you could tell if your parents loved you: "Love is when your mommy reads you a bedtime story. True love is when she doesn't skip any pages."²

I think this little girl hit a homerun with her answer about love. It has to do with our action. Even when a parent may not feel like reading another bedtime story, a loving parent doesn't skip any of the pages.

It's a bit like what Stephen Covey wrote in his best-selling book, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective*

People. Someone spoke to him, trying to understand what love meant in marriage:

“My wife and I just don’t have the same feelings for each other we used to have. I guess I just don’t love her anymore and she doesn’t love me. What can I do?”

“The feeling isn’t there anymore?” [Covey] asked.

“That’s right,” he reaffirmed. “And we have three children we’re really concerned about. What do you suggest?”

“Love her,” [Covey] replied.

“I told you, the feeling just isn’t there anymore.”

“Love her.”

“You don’t understand. The feeling of love just isn’t there.”

“Then love her. If the feeling isn’t there, that’s a good reason to love her.”

“But how do you love when you don’t love?”

[Covey replied:] “My friend, love is a verb. Love—the feeling—is a fruit of love, the verb. So love her. Serve her. Sacrifice. Listen to her. Empathize. Appreciate. Affirm her. Are you willing to do that?”³

I think many of us have gotten trapped in the romantic Hollywood version of love, filled with

emotional highs and tears of joy at the end of the movie. When that portion of a relationship diminishes, many are not sure how to love anymore. The problem with a romantic emotion-filled scene is that we do not get to see the rest of the story that happens many years later.

The author of 1 John wrote that love is an action. Love is something you do to embody God’s love in the world. It may feel good at times to demonstrate one’s love, but sometimes it’s hard work to offer a loving response to someone who wants to run the other way or seems to make all the wrong choices.

[Disciples preacher] Fred Craddock told a story of a family that lived in his neighborhood in Oklahoma. They had a daughter that was wild. “She was,” as Craddock described her, “hanging off the backend of every Harley in town.” She was arrested on some drug charges and sentenced to six months in jail. She was three months pregnant when she went into detention. She had her baby shortly before she was released, and the word got out that on Saturday she would be coming home from jail.

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On Saturday, Fred says, everybody in the neighborhood was out mowing their lawn. In fact, he spent most of the afternoon out there mowing his lawn and looking up the street at that house where the girl was coming home. He mowed the grass about two or three times in neat alternating rows, keeping an eye up the street. About dusk he says he was down to scissors clipping single blades of grass, until at last that girl came home, and she had her baby in her arms and everybody in the family came out to welcome her, and they went inside and had a big meal and cake and a celebration. And she cried, and her dad cried, and her mother cried. Everybody was awash [with tears] that afternoon at her welcome home party.⁴

That's love in action. Sometimes it includes wonderful feelings. Many times, it's hard work.

Forgiveness is part of the recipe. Our love comes from what God has done, for God loved us first and came in human flesh to experience our world—to laugh, to cry, to experience joy and pain, to see our pains and failures. Even after humanity hung Jesus on a cross to die, instead of condemning us, God continued to love us. God said, “I still love you,” and I will bring Jesus back to life to let you know that no matter what you do, I will still love you. Even in death, life is possible. Even in sin, forgiveness can happen. All I ask is that you put my love into action. Love one another as I have loved you.

¹ www.rinkworks.com/said/kidlove.shtml

² Michael Hodgin, *1002 Humorous Illustrations for Public Speaking*, #566.

³ <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/410169>

⁴ Retold by Jon M. Walton, www.fpcnyc.org