

**“The Love of God”**  
**The Family of God**  
**Downtown & Lexington**  
**January 3, 2021**

Man, it is good to see you all. If you're a guest, my name is Michael. I'm one of the pastors here.

If you had told me back in March that would be the last time our church gathered together in 2020, I would have called you nuts. But, here we are... 1 pandemic and a massive building project later... a lot has certainly changed, but it is good to be back.

I will say, despite how crazy 2020 was, I have been so encouraged by so many of you. From my seat on the bus, the majority of you have handled this so well. It's a blessing to witness you embrace the ambiguity of everything and be so flexible throughout it all. To see your commitment to following Jesus together in your LifeGroups when our groups really became all we could do. To see you respond to the needs of our community - our Family of Churches, gave somewhere between \$40 and \$50k in aid to folks hit hard by the pandemic. And I find that incredibly beautiful.

I know that very little of this past year was “easy” by any standard definition. But, as your pastor, it has been a real blessing to see how it shaped many of you to become more like Jesus.

However, at the same time. It has been and continues to be a very challenging season. Nearly every facet of our lives for the past year has had an immense amount of pressure placed on it.

I don't know if you've thought about it like this, but we've all just spent the past 9 months or so being forced to deal with our life choices. Where you live. Who you live with. The things you own. The relationships you have. Your parenting and its fruit. Who you are as a person and follower of Jesus when a lot of your normal support structures and/or distractions were stripped away. Your life was just sorta laid out on the table and you had nothing else to really look at or think about.

In some respects, and hopefully this isn't offensive to you, but 2020 was kind of a therapist's dream. Because we were all forced to look at our mental, emotional, and relational health in ways many of us never have before.

And I'd say that perhaps **nothing has been more tested**, or shaken, or highlighted in our lives over the past year than our **relationships**. And I mean that in both the broadest and narrowest of terms.

- For some of you, this has been a **really isolating season**. I know a theme I've heard from many of you has gone something like, "I just want to see people regularly again. Where I can see their actual, unhidden faces. To talk with them, to grab coffee with them, to worship with them, etc."
- On the flip side, for some of you, you have **spent more time with your family** in 2020, than in multiple other years combined. Some of you *thought* quality time was your love language... but working from home and guiding your kids through virtual school on top of the normal parenting duties has shown you that maybe that wasn't completely accurate.
- For some of you, **the folks in your LifeGroup** became the only real outlet of community in your life, and cultivating and maintaining those relationships presented all kinds of new difficulties and challenges.

And so after a year where our relationships have been tested and strained in new ways and as we enter into a new era of our relationships together as a church - we thought it'd be wise to start the year by looking at what has been so tested and tried: our relationships - to look at the relationships where we

parent, the relationships where we date and marry, the relationships we forge with other followers of Jesus... and discuss how we navigate them as the people of God in the family of God.

To start, I want to look at a relatively well-known passage of Scripture...

**1 John 4:7-8**

Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love.

The apostle John says, love is meant to define us. Love is meant to be what we're about as the church.

The second half of verse eight is likely one of the most popular and most quoted phrases in the entire Bible. Famed evangelist R.A. Torrey once called it, "the greatest sentence ever written."

Let us love one another, for love is from God... because God is... what? Love.

But what does it mean that "God is love"? In English, "love" has kinda become a junk drawer word that we use to talk about just about everything that we have an affinity for. If you ask 100 different people "what do you love?" You'll likely get a hundred different answers because we use the same word to talk about our feelings for tacos that we do for our spouse.

And so this begs the question what exactly is John saying? It's important to know because it impacts just about everything. So I want to spend some time here as we begin this journey together.

Now, this may surprise you, but to really understand what this means, we have to talk about who God fundamentally is... specifically, we have to talk about something called - the Trinity.

Now, you may be thinking, "why on earth would we have to talk about that?" If you grew up in church as I did, the Trinity kinda feels like this thing that you knew you should believe, but it was just so confusing and alien that you didn't really know why it mattered.

I've even found myself often echoing a quote I came across while prepping for this sermon that said, "the Trinity sounds like a doctrine we might never have had if a bunch of theologians long ago actually had girlfriends."

It's strange, right? But, here's the thing, **the Trinity actually shapes everything about how we understand God's character and what we think we exist for as God's people.**

So, if you'll indulge me for the next few minutes, I want to talk some theology with you and I think by the end you'll understand why it's so vitally important.

The Christian doctrine of the **Trinity is that God is one God, eternally existent in three persons.** The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Three persons. One God.

Now, the Bible doesn't actually use the word, Trinity. You're not gonna find it in the Old or New Testaments. But there's a difference between the word being absent and the concept being absent. Trinity is simply the term Christians have adopted to capture the fact that the one God has shown himself in Scripture to be three persons. It sums up his three-in-oneness, His tri-unity, if I may.

I'll show you just a few examples. First, in the creation narratives,

### **Genesis 1:1-2**

In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and void, and the darkness was over the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the faces of the waters.

There is God and there is His Spirit. And then God speaks and both His Word and His Spirit become active agents in creating. Now, that doesn't unpack the full significance that His Word and Spirit are going to come to play in Christian theology, but it's important to note that both are there from the beginning.

Then just a few verses later.

### **Genesis 1:26-27**

Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth." So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.

Interesting here that God calls himself an "us". It happens a handful of times in the Old Testament. And it's especially interesting what the Hebrew does here - the "let us" in 26 is plural, but then the word for "make" is the singular form of the verb.

It's almost like if you said "We am going to the store" It's intentionally grammatically incorrect in the Hebrew.

And this is just one example of this in the Old Testament. We see the Trinity present in different ways, but the concept is somewhat cloudy. In the New Testament, the picture becomes much more clear.

For example, Jesus' baptism in

### **Mark 1:9-11**

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And when he came up out of the water, immediately he saw the heavens being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased."

When Jesus comes out of the water, The Father speaks his love for him and the Spirit descends on Him and fills him with power. Here you have all three.

It's not tritheism, with three gods who work in harmony. It's also not that sometimes God takes one form and sometimes takes another, and that these are simply different manifestations of one God.

Instead, it's trinitarianism: one God in three distinct persons. God is not more fundamentally one than he is three, and he is not more fundamentally three than he is one.

We get a little more detail in places like **John 17** where Jesus prays...

### **John 17:4-5**

I glorified you on earth, having accomplished the work that you gave me to do. And now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had *with you* before the world existed.

Jesus was with God in eternity past and he describes what has been happening in the Trinity from all eternity. The Father, Son, and Spirit glorify each other since before time began.

**Theologian Cornelius Plantinga** talks about it this way, “the persons within God exalt each other...each divine person harbors the others at the center of his being. in constant movement of overture and acceptance, each person envelops and encircles the others...God’s interior life overflows with regard for others.”

The early Greek church had a word for this: **perichoresis**. It’s where our word “choreography” is derived from. It means “dance or flow around.” Each person of the trinity revolves, loves, adores, defers to, and rejoices in the others.

**I love the way CS Lewis** captures the idea: “God is not a static thing...but a dynamic life, a kind of drama. Almost, if you will not think me irreverent, a kind of dance.”

This is essentially the essence of the universe. The Father, Son, and Spirit are characterized in their very essence by a relationship of love. A mutual self-giving. No person in the Trinity insisting that the others revolve around him alone; rather each of them voluntarily circling and orbiting around the others.

God has eternally existed in this type of loving relationship - in this type of community - in this type of family, if I may. Which is kinda crazy to think about - that before the earth existed, humble, self-giving, familial love existed.

The point being, loving relationship is at the very core of who God is. And this is what John means when he says that “God is love.” It’s that fundamentally, at the core of His being, from eternity past, present and future, God has been giving of Himself in love.

Love was not some extra feeling or action he decided to do apart from his other traits like his holiness or omnipotence, but rather it is what lies at the very heart of who He is.

There was never a time in which God was not filled with love. Love is fundamentally a part of Him.

Since a loving relationship is a fundamental part of who God is, it is also fundamentally a part of who we are meant to be - as those made in His very image.

He created us to enjoy what he has enjoyed for all eternity. Mankind - including each and every one of us - was made to partake in, enjoy and reflect this eternal love found at the heart of Trinity.

Do you understand, God did not make us because He was lonely and needed some company? Because God is not a uni-personal God, He wasn’t by Himself sitting on a rough draft of an IKEA couch wishing He had somebody to watch the Office reruns with until he came up with the idea of creation.

No, God made us out of an overflow the love and relationship He already existed within. **We were made from this relationship for relationship.**

**To put it simply, we were made for the dance.**

If from all eternity, without end and without beginning, ultimate reality is a community of persons knowing and loving one another, then ultimate reality is actually about joining in that. And not just a relationship with God, but relationships with other image-bearers, as well.

**This is why we are relational.** This is why the desire for relationships is intrinsic to the human experience.

Do you remember in the Garden of Eden, Adam is there with perfect access to God and yet God says this is not good. He needs another person here with him. It is not good for him to be alone because he is made in God's image... who isn't alone...

- This is why for many of us the longing for connection in the midst of this year's pandemic has been so strong. Why many of us have had such a hard time isolating and quarantining.
- This is why tech companies like Zoom have made millions this year with platforms that help us connect to each other
- This is why solitary confinement is such a harsh punishment and why people who aggressively isolate often end up going crazy.

Because we were made for more.

But, the sad reality is we lost it where it matters most. Or rather to be more accurate, we left it.

Instead of joining the Trinity in self-giving, God-glorifying, or God-orbiting love, we chose (and still choose) to center ourselves on ourselves and demand others to do the same.

And this is really the essence of what the Bible calls sin - yes, sin is a failure to do what God commands - but at its heart, **sin is refusing to take part in the dance.**

It's a rejection to love God and love others as God loves and to instead say, "I am what life should center around - what I want, what I feel, what I think - is of ultimate importance.

And, believe it or not, the only place that ends is destruction. The more you choose to believe life is about you, the more miserable you'll actually become. If you believe life is about you, you will always believe people owe you something. That you deserve things you aren't getting. If it's about you, people better do what you expect of them.

Think about how much conflict that breeds in your heart, in your life. Think how much anger that stirs up in you. Think of the entitlement you walk in. Think about the frustration you live in.

This is the result of being out of sync with how God made you. And if the Scriptures are to be believed, remaining there - in what the Bible calls sin, with ourselves as the preeminent focus of life - it ends with God eventually giving you what you want - Eternity without Him.

Eternity without His presence. Eternity without His joy. Eternity without His peace. Eternity without being the recipient of his eternal love.

It reminds me of how the writer, David Foster Wallace described the human experience in his now-famous commencement address, that's it like we "had and lost some infinite thing." He was more right than I think he was even aware.

**But the good news is that the very reason Jesus came was to bring us back to the dance...**

#### **I John 4:9-10**

In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.

He says, "God manifested his love for us through Christ." Literally, it means he made visible his self-giving, eternal love in and through Jesus' life.

As Thomas Goodwin comments, Jesus "being manifest in the flesh, expresses and utters but what is in the heart of all three."

Jesus is what the Trinitarian love of God looks like enfleshed.

The argument of the text is that you cannot define love by what you see humanity doing, but by what God does.

The only way to know what real love is... how love is really defined is through the way that the Trinitarian God loves and THAT love is no more clearly seen than in Jesus, himself.

There's that big word in there, "propitiation." It's a word that means to appease wrath. And I know that makes a bunch of us uncomfortable here because it's like, "wait if God is love, how can he be wrathful?"

The quickest way I can think to explain this to you is to tell you to think of the person in your life that you love the most. Get that person in your mind. Now, what wouldn't you do about things that harm them?

Think of your kids, your spouse... the more you love something the more capable you are of wrath. My little girl, she's two, came home from pre-school the other day and said, "Daddy... Jacob hit me!" And I said, "well did you tell Jacob that if he hits you, you have a daddy is gonna come to get him?" And my wife had to jump in like, "Babe, they're two. What are you doing?" But, it was, I love my girl! And I won't stop at anything that threatens the ones I love!"

Now, my love and wrath are obviously imperfect and subject to all kinds sinful responses and lapses in justice and mercy, but God's aren't.

And the point is, you cannot separate love and wrath. Because God loves, He has wrath for everything and everyone that endangers what He loves.

And we don't like to think about sin that way, but that's precisely what sin does... it endangers what God loves - namely the world and the people that he made. It leads to the destruction of ourselves and those around us... and what makes God's love so beautiful is that He won't stand for it.

Like a pastor I heard recently say, "to say God has no wrath is to say that he has no love." God has wrath because He is love... and He loves enough to destroy the very thing that will destroy you.

And when the thing that will destroy you is you... He says, I'll stand in your place. I'll take it all on me so that you can go free. *That* is how much God loves you.

Jesus, the second person of the Trinity, coming into the world to meet us in our sinfulness and weakness, to offer up his life to make right what sin had made wrong - is Jesus doing for us what He had been doing with the Father and the Spirit from all eternity.

To not only pay the price for our sin, to not just forgive us, but to woo us back to the infinite thing we lost so long ago.

And if there is nothing else you hear me say this morning, hear this... God loves you.

With the same eternal love that He has been enjoying inside the Trinity since before the world began, He loves you.

And not some future version of you. Not the you that you wish you were. But the real you. Not a you that has cleaned yourself up first and gotten your act together, but you. With all your mess, with all your struggle, with all your need.

And I know so many of us who struggle - for whatever reason - to believe that. Who are like, "God how can that be true, you don't know what I've done, you don't know where I've been." But, it's true and his nail-scarred hands are the proof.

For those who chose another dance, He comes offering to cut in.

To do what you couldn't do for yourself - to cleanse you from sins and failures to give you life as you were meant to be.

And when it comes to our relationships with others, Jesus came so that we could be recipients of His divine love, and to become those who share it.

**I John 4:11**

Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.

And here actually lies the real ingredient to navigating your relationships whatever they may be - **learning to share what you have received.**

Learning to give to others, what God has first given to you.

We were actually made for "give yourself away" relationships. This is where we come to most find ourselves and feel at home. When we settle into the position of loving others as God first loved us.

*The key* to navigating all of our relationships - from the easiest ones to the most difficult, is to learn to love with the self-giving, sacrificial, love found within the Trinity.

This, in fact, is what human flourishing and spiritual maturity actually look like.

You were designed to give yourself away for the glory of God and the good of those around you. To lose yourself in the life and love of God. To forsake personal ambitions and preferences, personal demands for what you want to get out of life and others. And give yourself to something beyond yourself. There is no way to become who God means for you to be outside of this.

To say it a bit more directly, if you want you and your relationships to thrive, you have got to get over you. You're not the point, and the more you think you are the point, the more you will be enslaved to a thousand vices... because you are bumping up against ultimate reality.

If you'll get over you, you'll have a better marriage. Because when it's about you, then your spouse is your servant, given to you by God to make everything better for you. They cannot do that. Learning to share what you've received will dissipate so much conflict as you lay your life down for your spouse like Jesus did for you - instead of breeding fight after fight as you demand they fulfill you.

You'll be a better parent if it's not about you. Some of y'all don't realize this but you don't actually have bad kids. Some of you do - FOR SURE - but not all of you. Some of you just have kids who annoy you because they won't revolve their little lives around you and your convenience. And there's a difference. Learning to share what you have received will enable you to have patience and grace for all the inconveniences - both big and small - your kids present to you...and even their actual disobedience and sin, too just like God has shown to you.

This will completely change your friendships. Learning to share what you have received, will lead you to stop asking "are people being a good friend to me?" and instead start asking "Am i being a good friend to others?" I'm I loving them as Christ does? It will change your life and you just might come to realize you have more friends than you previously thought.

When we do, we become the very vehicle by which God shows Himself off to the world around us.

**I John 4:12**

No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us.

As wild as this may sound, when you become a person who shares what you have received, you become the means by which others may see God.

And that's exactly what the family of God - the church - is here to do.

And it's not an easy path. When the rubber meets the road, it gets a bit messy, but that is the journey we are aiming to take together over the next several weeks.

So, I just want to invite you to turn from your other sinful and failing dances and receive the love God has for you through faith in Jesus and let's learn together the way of love from the God who *is* love.