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Episcopal Church
1 John 4: 7-21
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Trinity
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Growing in Love—Together:
A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Susan Allison-Hatch

Sometimes I struggle with scripture. Now you might say, “Susan, that’s part of your job. After all, you are a priest, and struggling with scripture is part of what you do.” But my struggles with scripture started long before I was ordained. There are parts I find hard to believe. Books—whole books of the Bible—that make me wonder why they are there. And then there are passages that confuse me or frustrate me or make me squirm. Passages like those from the First Letter of John that we read today.

John writes, “Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God....Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love....and those who abide in love abide in God....There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment(—huh?) and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love.”

I hear those words and I wonder, “How far from God can one get?” I focus on my fears—fear of rejection, fear of the unknown, fear of change—and I think to myself, “I will never get there—I will never know that kind of love—perfect love.” Sometimes I despair. Sometimes I say to myself, “Guess I’ll settle for a lesser kind of love.”

But when I do, when I say that, when I give in to my despair; I miss the point, I miss the mark, and that, my friends, is sin.

John isn’t talking about perfect love. That’s not the word at all. The word, we translate as “perfect” really means mature or complete. This passage, this letter, is not pointing to a destination or a standard of perfection none of us can meet, it’s pointing to a way of living and growing and abiding in God who is love.

You see, when we focus on our fears, we focus on ourselves, on what others do to us—disappointing us, hurting us, rejecting us. When we focus on our fears, we get defensive. Sometimes we put up walls; sometimes we withdraw into ourselves; sometimes we lash out. I suspect that’s what was happening in the community John was addressing. People were afraid and were focusing on their fears.

“But mature love casts out fear....” That’s a call for a change of focus. The love God calls us to is a love that reaches out, a love that connects with the other, a love that is way too busy responding to human need, to have time to focus on anything else.

The psalmist says, “He brought me out into an open place. He rescued me because he delighted in me.” Mature love, mothering love, is one that brings the beloved out into an

open place—a place where the lover can delight in the beloved and a place where the beloved can delight in herself.

There's no fear in mature love—there's no time for it. Because if you're loving, you're focusing not on yourself but on your beloved. Think of the times you've reached out in love, the times you've responded to human need, the times you've focused solely on delighting in someone else. Those are times when fear and the responses fear triggers in us just fade away. Open places. Places where we can delight in one another. Times and places where we just love.

Maturity doesn't come overnight. It's something we grow into—not in a day or a week or year or maybe even a lifetime. Maturity comes as we struggle with everyday challenges—challenges like those John points to in this letter. The challenges brought about by fear and the challenges brought about by antipathy and failure to love.

Remember what John says to that little band of Christians—“Those who say, ‘I love God,’ and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen.”

The first time I ever read those words, “for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen” I was sunk--stopped dead in my tracks. I was engaged in a long-term battle with my brother over my mother's care. I couldn't even speak to him, I was so mad at him. I read those words, and thought, “I do not love my brother. What chance have I.”

I imagine most of us at one time or another have people in our lives we cannot or do not love—people we avoid, people we shun, people with whom we just cannot connect, people to whom we don't really want to connect—people we have trouble loving.

How then can we abide in love?

By remembering it's not a matter of becoming perfect in love but rather of maturing in love. Abiding in love is something we do in degrees. One step at a time. Reaching out to the one who loves us by reaching out to those we meet along the way. First to one and then to another. One person, one gesture at a time.

But there's something else in this growing, maturing in love. It's not something we do on our own. It's something we do in community—something we do with one another. Think about the way John frames this passage. He begins, ““Beloved, let **us** love one another....” Love is not something we do on our own, in isolation from one another. Love is something we do in community. Indeed, this whole first letter of John is addressed not to an individual but to a community. Think of it. Love springs from community. It's not an individual, Valentine's Day kind of thing. Because **we** love, you and I can live in love.

One of my favorite authors—Madeleine L'Engle—tells the story of a time when she was waiting for communion. She was sitting directly behind someone she knew well—someone who came to church every day no matter how bad the weather was. Someone who hated Asians and would never take communion from an Asian priest. On the Sunday in question, there was a Japanese priest presiding at the service. Throughout the first part of the service, L'Engle bent herself into a pretzel over the man in front of her. She was sure would be outraged by his refusal to take communion from one who fell outside his zone of the acceptable. She tells of how her anger grows—grows to the point that she does not feel that she can be in communion with him or God. She says to herself, “I am not in love and charity with this man...and therefore according to the rubrics, I should not go up to the altar”(Madeleine L'Engle, The Irrational Season).

But then something clicks in her. The way L'Engle puts it, “I knew that my only hope of love and charity was to go forward and receive the elements.” And so she did, saying to herself and silently to the man in front of her as well, “All right, brother. Let us be forgiven together then. I will hold out my hands for both of us today, and you do the same for me tomorrow morning when I will be asleep while you trudge through the dirty streets to church. It is all right for me to be outraged by what you are doing here in the presence of God, as long as it does not set me apart from you.”

Because **we** love, you and I are able to live in love. Sometimes I love for you. Sometimes you love for me. Together we abide in love. Together we abide in God. That's what being church is all about. Thanks be to God.