

LOVE WITHOUT END

Are there any fans of the game show *Jeopardy* here this morning? I don't watch *Jeopardy* very often, but when I do, sometimes a category comes up that catches my attention. Like, for instance, "The Bible." So, let's play a little *Jeopardy* this morning. I'll be Alex Trebek. And let me remind you, contestants, that your answers must be in the form of a question.

"We'll start with "The Bible" for \$100.00: "Then the LORD put a mark on [blank] so that no one who found him would kill him." "Who is 'Cain?'" is the response I was looking for.

Shall we continue? How about "The Bible" for \$200.00: "The last enemy to be destroyed is [blank]. The correct answer is, "What is 'death?'"

All right, we're almost out of time. Let's go with "The Bible" for \$500.00. Oh, look! It's a "*Daily Double*," so this is worth \$1,000.00! Good luck. "Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is [blank]."

Time's up, contestants. If you responded, "What is 'Love'?" you were correct. Thanks for playing *Jeopardy*. We'll see you next time.

God is love. God is love. God is love. That's not new information. You know this. You learned it in Sunday School classes. You've heard it from this pulpit or some other pulpit numerous times. You've sung it in hymns. Maybe you've seen a bumper sticker with those words on it. "God is love. The message is so common and familiar in the Christian church, you might well think the statement "God is love" is on almost every page of the Bible, and especially in the Gospels. But surprise! It's not. Jesus himself never uttered those words.

Think about it. Do you remember reading or hearing read anywhere in the pages of Matthew, Mark, Luke or John, "Jesus walked by the Sea of Galilee and said to Simon and Andrew, "Come, follow me, because God is love"? Or, in Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, did he ever say, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for God is love. Blessed are those who mourn, for God is love. Blessed are the meek, for God is love. Blessed are the peacemakers, for God is love."?

No, Jesus never made that claim. During his entire three year ministry here on earth, Jesus never said the words, "God is love."

But what about the Apostle Paul? Surely he must have written the words “God is love” dozens of times, right?

Again, that’s simply not the case. Although he wrote a lot about love, nowhere in any of Paul’s letters did he declare that “God is love.”

The words “God is love” are so familiar to us Christians and so imbedded in our hearts that you might expect to find them everywhere in the Bible. But we only find them in one place: a brief, obscure letter in the New Testament called 1 John. “God is love,” wrote the author. He wrote it twice, and that’s it. In all the sixty-six books of the entire Bible, “God is love” is only written those two times, both of them in the same very short and not very well-known epistle. We certainly say and hear “God is love” more frequently than that. We say it or hear it a lot. That declaration was given to the church for the church’s use, and the church has grabbed hold of it and run with it throughout its two thousand years of existence.

Sometimes, when we’re talking about our beliefs and our Christian faith, “God is love” is all we say. We may even use or hear the term so often we get a little sick of it. But an argument can probably be made that either it can be said too much, or it can’t be said often enough. On the one hand, we can’t hear “God is love” too frequently because many times we forget it or we come to doubt it, and we need to hear and be reminded and reassured that God is love over and over again. But on the other hand we can say “God is love” so much and repeat it so often, the statement begins to lose its meaning and diminish in its power to heal and comfort and reassure us.

The statement “God is love” is a central mystery of the Christian faith, but we do need to be careful because speaking about and proclaiming the loving nature of God can be misused and trivialized. “God is love” can be used as cheap grace to get off the hook after committing some terrible act of hurt or destruction. “It’s okay. I don’t have to sweat it. God is love, so God still loves me.”

Or, “God is love” can be used for a Band-Aid to try to cover over deep and painful wounds, or as a substitute for concrete acts of ministry. Maybe we encounter a homeless person on the street, asking for help; or someone we know has been diagnosed with cancer or some other serious illness; or they’re going through a painful divorce; or they’ve been laid off from their job and could lose their home; and we don’t know what to say or do because we’re unable to fix the problem, so we give them a faltering, awkward, half-hearted, “God is love” type of statement.

I believe with all my heart that God is love; and I would wager that most, if not all of you believe that, too. But that fact, as true as it is, is not a magic

cure that takes care of everything. It's not a panacea or a magic bullet to solve our problems. And the words "God is love" aren't a replacement for the actions our loving God calls us to do so others will see by our deeds that "God is love."

The first letter of John is where the Bible comes right out and says, "God is love;" but the author also understands the danger of how the magnificent and boundless love of God can be reduced to cheap sentiments and shallow intentions. In the third chapter of the letter, the writer reminds his flock, "Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action."

1 John is one of the shortest books in the Bible, easily overlooked and often skipped over as we flip through our Bibles looking for the statement that "God is love." But as difficult as it is to find "God is love" in the Bible, it's much more difficult to find evidence that "God is love" outside the Scriptures, in the world we live in. Read any newspaper, watch any news broadcast on TV or scroll the news from a legitimate news website on the Internet, and you will find all sorts of examples of the world's love affair, not with the God of love, but with the "gods" of money, power, corruption, dishonesty, bigotry and violence.

The world knows a whole lot about sex and lust, and often confuses those things with love; but on the other hand, the world seems to know very little about genuine love, and even less about the God who is love. Everything we know about love—I'm talking about authentic love, now—everything we know about love, we've received from God. The world can't honestly tell us that "God is love," because in all honesty, the world doesn't know it. Only God can tell us.

Better yet, according to 1 John, God has showed us that God is love: "This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that God loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. And in that sentence is a word that defines what genuine love—God's love—is: "sacrifice." Only with sacrifice is authentic love revealed and made known. Love without sacrifice is just a phony imposter for the real thing.

Through self-giving gestures of sacrifice, we discover that love is a gift. The gift of love is so pure, it doesn't ask anything of us; and it's so compelling that we're irresistibly moved to share the gift of love with others. "Beloved," The author of John wrote, "since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another." And when we love one another, that love mysteriously becomes God's love for us. God's love and our love are so intertwined that John can say, "God is love, and those who live in love abide in God, and God lives in them." It seems there's an intimate connection between God's divine love and the human love we share with one another. In other words, our love and God's love are the

same love; they're made of the very same substance. It's a mystery that can't be explained. It can only be trusted and lived out by us; and when we do live it out, that's when we come to discover that it's true. God's love for us and our love for God and each other is one and the same.

My friends, it's in God's great love for us that we live and move and have our existence. It's in God's love that we speak promises of fidelity and support to our intended spouses and to God in marriage. It's in God's love that we take young children into our arms, bring them to the baptismal font, and name them God's children. It's in God's love that we gather around the Lord's Table to eat and drink together in remembrance of Jesus, God's only Son, whom God gave to the world in love to embody God's love and to keep us from perishing.

It's in God's love we offer our prayers, petitions and words of gratitude and sing our hymns during worship services like this. It's in God's love that we falter and fail and commit sins that deny God's love; and it's in God's love that we are forgiven of and restored from those failings and sins. It's in God's love that we, the church of Christ, do the ministry God has called us to do. It's in God's love that we are born, grow up and grow old. And it's in God's love that we entrust our deceased loved ones—and ultimately ourselves when we die—into God's loving, eternal care.

In short, we're enfolded in the love of God each and every moment of our living and our dying—from our very first breath to our very last breath. And God's love for us continues in the life to come. Yes, God is love. If we know nothing else about God, we at least know that much.

You probably haven't heard the name Julian of Norwich. And that's not at all surprising because very little is actually known about her. She was an English nun who lived in the fourteenth century, and everything we know about her is known solely through her writings, which she called *Showings*. In the solitude of Julian of Norwich's life as a nun, and through years of her chronic ill health, often near death, she believed God had repeatedly shown her things. Spiritual things the world wasn't able to see. And she wrote those showings down.

Once, Julian said, God had shown her something in a vision by placing in her hand a little ball, no larger than a hazelnut. "What can this be?" she wondered. God gave her the answer: "It is everything that is made." All the creation, the entire cosmos, was shown to her in a tiny form that could be lost in a coat pocket, and was so fragile even a light breath of air could splinter it into pieces. "I was amazed that it could last," said Julian. "It was so small that it could suddenly fall into nothing."

But the important thing God showed her was this: "[God's creation] lasts, and always will, because God loves it. Everything that was, is, and ever will be,

has existence through the love of God.”

Like every one of us, Julian of Norwich wondered about the meaning of her life and the reason for her suffering and sickness. When she asked God to show her that meaning, she wrote: “I was answered in spiritual understanding. And it was said: “What, do you wish to know your Lord’s meaning in this thing? Then know it well. Love was God’s meaning. Who reveals it to you? Love. What did God reveal to you? Love. Why does God reveal it to you? For love. Remain in this love, and you will know more of the same. And you will never know anything different, than love without end.”

Love without end. That’s another fitting and truthful description of who God is and what God is.

Love without end.

From our birth to our baptism to our burial, and every moment of our lives in between, God is love. And wherever the path of our life’s journey leads, through all the years of our human existence and continuing on into our eternal existence, God’s wish and deepest desire is for us to know more and more of God’s love, and to never know anything different, than love without end.

Why? Because God is love. God is love. God is love.

Thanks be to God. Amen.