

Isaiah 65:1-3, 17, 21-25

1 John 4:7-21

“All You Need is Love, but What is Love?”

Rev. David Pierce

April 29, 2018

I am not a music critic. I have never written a song or a lyric in my lifetime. If someone walked in and asked all the musicians to stand up, I would have to sit down. Neither am I a sociologist or psychologist or nutritionist. I am not qualified to speak about the human experience—the human mind and body and all its senses—and what our species truly needs in order to thrive and survive in this world. And yet I can tell you, that if we took a microphone and video camera over to Dave’s Market after church today, and stood in the parking lot asking people to describe in 5 words or less what our world needs more of today, 8 out of 10—no, 9 out of 10—people would say, “All you need is love.” And they’d have to try not to sing it.

*All you need is love
All you need is love
All you need is love, love
Love is all you need*

But what is love? We love our families, we love our country, we love our church, we love our neighbor. I love my wife but I’ve also been known to say that I love Bruce Springsteen and black raspberry ice cream. We know people who have stood in the dark on a lonely street corner with a candle in hand holding a sign in the name of love, and we know people who have strapped bombs to their chests and stepped onto busy street corners to detonate life in the name of love. I know people, and I’m sure you do too, who live their whole lives in one place. Don’t travel much, never really ever move around. One day their spouse comes to them and says, we got to get out of this place. They say, why would we want to do that? I love this place.

What is love? The Hebrew scriptures, what we call the Old Testament, has at least three different words giving definition to love. So complex and nuanced is love that the rabbis said, one word isn’t going to cut it. One of those words is the word for friendship. The love of a friend, a companion, of having someone you can whisper secrets to and go on morning walks with. For some, the love of friend is so deep that it leads to another layer of love. The love of deep affection. When people have affection for one another, it is as if their

hearts and minds bend towards one another with such intensity that you could no sooner tie their love down than to hold back the tide. This is decisive love, willful love. It's the kind of love that makes a person say, I don't want to be anywhere else in the world right now than here with you.

Now it should be said that it's possible to have commitment without having friendship. Like when two people have lived together for a long time but then they realize, suddenly or slowly, they're not living together anymore. There may still be love, but it is love more for obligation and responsibility than it is for anything else.

The third type of love we can speak about is what the Greeks call "eros." Erotic, sexual, and arousing, the Hebrews spoke of this love as being beautiful to the human experience, but as also having great consequences if divorced from the friendly virtues of trust, mutual care, and respect. Eros is what led King David to take Bathsheba from where she was on her rooftop, bathing alone, and to overpower her for his own pleasure, only to then have to find a way to cover up his guilt by having her husband murdered.

All you need is love. It sounds wonderful. Like something you'd read on a bumper sticker or see plastered to a billboard or sing about in a song. The problem though is that it doesn't do much for actually helping us to love one another, because it's too generic. All you need is love, but what is love?

I'm sure the music critic among us could tell us exactly what John Lennon had in mind when he wrote it down as the title and chorus of his 1967 song, which includes some of the following as verses:

*There's nothing you can do that can't be done
Nothing you can sing that can't be sung
No one you can save that can't be saved
There's nothing you can know that isn't known
There's nowhere you can be that isn't where you're meant to be
It's easy*

*All you need is love (all together now)
All you need is love (everybody)*

I take Lennon to mean that there's nothing you can do...that if done in love... can't be done. There's nothing you can sing that if sung in love can't be sung. There's nowhere you

can be that if you're there in love isn't where you're meant to be. It's easy. All you need is love, but what is love?

The writer of the first letter of John has an answer for us. Living in 2nd century, this writer, who may or may not but probably wasn't someone named John, defines love in this way: not that we loved God but that God loved us, and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. John is living in a world where the Christian church is just starting to take root and shape. It's been about a century since Jesus lived and died and is believed to have been raised again, and during that time some have started to say that maybe Jesus isn't who we think he was. Maybe he was just a figment of our imaginations. Maybe the bit about him being God's own son was just a story cooked up to make us all think that God really could care enough to come and dwell among us mere mortals. Maybe none of it was true. After all, has anyone actually seen Jesus recently? Has anyone sat down to dinner with him? Has anyone felt his touch or heard him speak? How can we say that Jesus loves us like God when he is nowhere to be found now? What kind of love is that?

"Well no one has ever seen God," says John. "But if we love one another, God's love is made complete within us, and this is love: not that we loved God but that God loved us."

Thomas Aquinas, the great Dominican friar of the Catholic Church in the 13th century, called God the "Primary Mover." That when it comes to love, God makes the first move. With God, there are no prerequisites that we must meet before we are loved. There is no first, second, third, or tenth date that we have to go out on to show God that we are serious about the relationship. We don't need to buy God a ring or a house or prove to God that we'll be a good provider before God is willing to make the decision and move in with us. Page after page after page of scripture proclaims that this is a story about a God who moves towards us even when we have turned away from God, a God whose love is primary, fierce, unrelenting.

Even when you were in your mother's womb, I knew you, says God, and I loved you...Even when you were sinners, I loved you, says God...Even when you betrayed me, said you didn't know me, and hung me on a cross and left me for dead, I was still whispering prayers of forgiveness, because I love you.

It is always the case whenever new parents come asking to have their child baptized, that I will ask them to tell me why they want to do this, and it's almost always the

case that they will respond by saying that they just want the child to grow up knowing that God loves them. To which I say, “Whoever or whatever told you that God doesn’t?” And then I’ll tell them this story: about a day that is coming soon, when their precious baby is going to going to turn into a less precious 5-year old, and they’re going to do something so stupid that you will send them to their room, where they will weep and moan. And you’ll tell them not to come out until you open the door, which you will, maybe after 3 or 4 minutes. And you’ll go in to where they are, and you’ll sit on their bed beside them, and your son or daughter may ask you, “Do you forgive me?” And this is when it will hit you, when you’ll realize, they don’t know. They don’t know what you know, that they’ve already been forgiven, that never was their moment when you hadn’t already decided to forgive them. And you’ll put your arms around them, pull them on to your lap, and hug and kiss them, which is what you were going to do anyway.

Then I’ll look at the parents and say, that’s baptism. And this is love. It’s being the first to make a move towards forgiveness. It’s being the first to open the door to hurt and pain, so the healing light of reconciliation can come in. It is the power to take the first step, because the person who take the first step is the person who shows the rest of the world what is possible. In the words of John, love is not being afraid to open our eyes to the person right in front of us—to the stranger, to the enemy, to the crazed 5-year old who is your own flesh and blood, to the person who is so different from us that it scares us—and to call them brother, sister. For how can we love God if we do not love our brothers and sisters also?