



Westminster Presbyterian Church
 Knoxville, TN
 April 14, 2024
 The Rev. Dr. Richard Coble
 Sermon: “Love In Deed”

1 John 3:1-7 (NRSV)

3:1 See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are. The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him.

3:2 Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is.

3:3 And all who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure.

3:4 Everyone who commits sin is guilty of lawlessness; sin is lawlessness.

3:5 You know that he was revealed to take away sins, and in him there is no sin.

3:6 No one who abides in him sins; no one who sins has either seen him or known him.

3:7 Little children, let no one deceive you. Everyone who does what is right is righteous, just as he is righteous.

“Love In Deed”

Let’s start by admitting 1 John sets an impossibly high bar:

‘no one who abides in [God] sins; no one who sins has either seen [God] or known [God].’

And the lectionary was actually kind to us by stopping at v. 7, but if you keep on, you’ll find it digs in further:

v. 8 “Everyone who commits sin is a child of the devil”

v. 9 “Those who have been born of God do not sin.”

It's a pretty high bar for the Children of God, "And that is what we are," according to v. 2.

We saw last week, for 1 John, sin and righteousness have everything to do with love:

Chapter 4: "Everyone who loves is born of God and knows God."

That's almost the reverse of our passage today:

"no one who sins has either seen [God] or known [God]."

To avoid sin, in other words, is to love. Those who love never sin and those who sin never love, in the world of 1 John.

- A pretty high bar for the Children of God.

It begs the question: is this how love works in our world?

Because in my experience, love isn't perfect in practice.

It's messy.

What is your experience, with the practice of love?

I wish the movement of love in our lives more closely resembled the grace of a ballerina, but no, love mainly tromps and plops, fall over and tip-toes through our lives.

Says the Christian writer Anne Lamott, in her newest book on love.¹

Lamott tells a story about an old friend named Tim. Those of you who have read Anne Lamott before knows she's a recovering addict, and so she serves as a mentor and friend to Tim, a fellow traveler in recovery. And one day, Tim was lamenting to her about his relationship with a woman named Emma, who, in Lamott's words:

Has hurt Tim's feelings a number of times, with what she imagines is helpful advice of how to be more successful than he has managed to be so far and how to lose a few pounds.

Tim laments his relationship with Emma, and being human, and trying to be a friend, Lamott takes Tim's side. She also attacks Emma: 'She's jealous of you Tim. Her charms are a façade. She's just a mess herself. Why do you listen to Emma's advice?'

¹ Anne Lamott, *Somehow: Thoughts on Love* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2024). All quotes and story below are from chapter 2: "Shelter."

They laugh. Tim shrugs the moment off. Lamott goes home.

A couple of hours later, Tim calls her:

He said that he was sorry, but he didn't want me to be his mentor anymore, she writes. He said, 'Listening to the cruel way you talked about Emma, I realized I don't want to turn out like you. You were so two-faced and mean.'

Hearing that, Lamott wants to crawl under a rock. She apologizes profusely. She feels shame. She thinks, Tim had seen her for who she really is, not the light-hearted hippy Christian author we all know and love but a mean, bitter, two-faced person. Anne Lamott feels exposed.

Have you ever felt exposed like that?

Tim had triggered the most universal fear: that once you really know us, we are not lovable, writes Lamott.

Have you ever felt unlovable?

Her instincts are to text Tim, every day, and grovel. To apologize again, and again, and again.

But here's the thing. She had already apologized.

And she wasn't so worried that Tim was mad at her. She was worried Tim was right. That she was a fraud. That she didn't deserve his friendship.

So, every day, for about a week, she felt the pressing shame telling her to grovel again to Tim, to win back his approval, so she could feel okay with herself again. But she doesn't reach out again. She waits.

Why?

She had hurt Tim, and she realized, Tim, in turn, had hurt her.

In fact, he had touched the nerve of one of her deepest insecurities:

Could she still love herself, knowing Tim was upset?

I don't know about you, but I wrestle with that very question myself sometimes:

Am I worthy of love, when someone is upset with me?

Do you ever wrestle with that question?

In the end, Tim texts her. He realized it was his turn to apologize. We wound one another; we ask for forgiveness.

Love is messy in practice, for the children of God.

When was the last time you loved imperfectly?

My guess is that it's right now.

Because that is what being in relationship is all about. Loving the best we can, imperfectly. I don't know how else to live in this world as a child of God.

Maybe that's why 1 John, a few chapters before our text today, also says, *If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.* Because love is messy. And sometimes, to tell the truth, we need to ask forgiveness. We need confess.

And I can't imagine confession and forgiveness make us any less the children of God. In fact, I think it makes us even more the children of God. Anne Lamott and Tim lived into their belovedness not just in the good times, but especially when love became difficult.

Because, in the midst of our tromping and plopping in imperfect acts of love and forgiveness, in this life, the spirit of God works upon us "Beloved, we are God's children now"; the verse continues: "What we will be has not yet been revealed." You see, even 1 John, ch. 3 says it's a journey more than a destination.

On Tuesday night, 114 members of the Westminster community attended the Nehemiah Action Assembly hosted by Justice Knox.² Our own mayors Kincannon and Jacobs were in attendance, along with several members of the schoolboard and other elected and non-elected leaders of this city.

It was a remarkable event. Organizers focused specifically on issues of economic instability, homelessness, and education in our city.

We learned that about 200,000 residents of the City of Knoxville fall into the category of ALICE, which stands for **A**sset **L**imited **I**ncome **C**onstrained **E**mployed, meaning they work, and they live paycheck to paycheck. We heard how many if not most of those 200,000 today are struggling to find the resources to keep up with the sky-rocking costs of rent in this city.

² <https://justiceknox.org>

We learned on any given day, about 2,000 of our neighbors are living without homes in Knoxville, and another 250 are at risk of homelessness.

And we learned that Knox County schools had 1,000 suspensions last year. Data shows that if you're Black, you are 3.5x more likely to be suspended for the same behavior than if you are white. And if you are disabled or poor you are more than twice as likely to be suspended than if you're middle class or able-bodied.

Suspensions lead to drop-outs.
Dropping-out leads to income instability.
Income instability leads to homelessness.
It's a cycle; it's a connection; these are connected issues.

One of our speakers Tuesday talked about that feeling you get, when you're stopped at a stoplight, and you see someone on the corner with a cardboard sign asking for help. And maybe you give them some money. Maybe you're even more prepared, you give them some supplies. But you know, it's just a drop in the bucket. You know there's going to be someone at the next intersection, or the next one, or the next one. And this same person's going to be there again tomorrow, and the next day, and the next day.

And you feel a sense of powerlessness.
You feel a sense of guilt, that you can't do more.
Do you know that feeling? It's a collective powerlessness he told us. It's a collective guilt, too.

Because this is something that we, the collective *we*, our systems, our governments, our ways of being in this world have made happen.

It's a collective problem.
It's a you, and me, and us problem.
It's also collective failure, a failure of all to be good neighbors, to 200,000 of our neighbors. And that's just one city, in a country where so many are hurting. We have loved imperfectly.

But here's the thing: "Beloved we are God's children."
And the love that comes from God to God's children changes us, it transforms us.

How do we know? Because a thousand people of different faiths showed up on a Tuesday night, with the same goal, to be better neighbors.

Yes, it was *still* messy.

And yes, the steps taken were incremental and partial.

We sure didn't solve homelessness, income inequality, and systemic racism that night, not by a long shot. Of course, we didn't.

But the love of God is still at work in us, the Children of God.

And it has been at work. It took years to get to last Tuesday night. It will take years more work to keep carrying the steps made thus far.

It's a community transformed, and transforming.

And I don't just mean Westminster. I mean Knoxville.

A thousand neighbors came out for something bigger than themselves.

See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are.

Friends, in all things, especially when the end is uncertain, we have to keep on trusting that God's Spirit is working on us, that God's Spirit is transforming us, transforming you and me, the imperfect, beloved children of God that we are. Can you trust that?

Another example: This week we got news that we knew was coming but was nonetheless hard to hear, that our beloved director of music Peter Van Eenam is retiring, after 42 years of faithful service at Westminster.

We rejoice with Peter and with Anne that they are taking this step. It is well deserved.

Peter has been at Westminster longer than I have been alive. Sorry, Peter. That's not a slight at your age. It's just my way of saying that it's hard, if not impossible, for most of us, especially those who have been here for decades, to think of Westminster without thinking about Peter Van Eenam. The two have gone hand in hand for most of their joint existence.

I said in my letter this week that Peter has laid a foundation here of faithfulness, hard work, and musical excellence that will continue for as long as Westminster is Westminster. Nothing is going to change that, not even this change.

And yet we find ourselves at a time of uncertainty. There is discomfort in this reality. There's no denying it.

And at the same time, those words of 1 John remain true: “Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed.” 1 John likely means that in an eschatological sense, a ‘sweet by and by’ sense, when one day we will be free from the powers of sin and death, and what 1 John says, about how ‘No one who abides in God sins,’ will be true. Someday.

But it’s also true that God is at work in us, as a church, in this transformative moment, and “what we will be has not yet been revealed.” Even in unprecedented times, we can nonetheless be rest assured, that God is at work in Peter’s life in this change, and God is at work in Westminster’s life in this change.

God is at work. God is at work.
In the transformations of our lives.

And “what we will be has not yet been revealed.”
But if we keep showing up for each other.
And we keep our eye out for the work of the Spirit.
And we believe that the power of love, however imperfect in practice, can heal and transform this world, then we will see the work of God in and through this transformation too.

For, we are God's children now. Love is messy.
We do our best to love. In fact, we hold onto it for dear life, especially in the times, when we don’t know the ending.

Because as we do, we remember who we are.
We remember whose we are.
We are children of God. Transformed. Transforming.
And together, in faith, in gratitude, in trust, we keep an eye out, for what will be revealed. Amen.