

Easter 5 B  
April 28, 2024  
I John 4:7-28

*“Love Pie in the Sky”*  
Rev. Dr. Brandon S. Perrine

*Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love . . . No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and God’s love is perfected in us . . . There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. We love because God first loved us. 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 commandment we have from God is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.*

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I’m going to begin this morning with a bold statement: I’m not a big fan of romantic comedies. I don’t like rom-coms. I know that makes me a fuddy-duddy, an outlier, even, in some circles, a pariah. But I don’t like them. Maybe it’s the predictable plotlines, or the rosy-colored lack of realism through which the characters seem to see the world, or maybe it’s just the overall silliness of the writing. Characters say the most ridiculous things and get away with it! Things like: “Waiting for you is like waiting for rain in this drought. Useless and disappointing,” from *A Cinderella Story*, or, “Any man, anytime, has the chance to sweep a woman off her feet. He just needs the right broom,” from *Hitch*, or, “He is the cheese to my macaroni,” from *Juno*. Talk about cheese! The writers aren’t exactly flexing the muscles of the human intellect here.

I get it though, not everything needs to be highly intellectual, or super realistic, or totally unpredictable. There's a reason this genre has been described as the comfort food of the cinema. Sometimes, folks just want to feel good watching a film. As long as movie-goers don't expect love and relationships to work like this in real life, I guess there's no harm done. But, do we?

Too often, it seems, human beings do expect love and relationships, romantic and platonic alike, to work like what we see in the movies. Love is supposed to sound like Marvin Gaye, feel like a hug and butterflies, taste like strawberries and champagne, and look like a rainbow, right? If it doesn't, it can't be love, right? And friends will be by our side no matter what and relationships should never feel like work, right?

With expectations like these, we'll all end up looking for some big Love Pie in the sky instead of doing the hard work of love in the world. And love is hard work. I think that's why the authors of scripture come back to it again, and again, and again.

Today's text from the Epistle of First John makes one of the boldest and most beautiful claims about God in all of scripture: God is love. I love this. It's a remarkable idea, isn't it? The danger, however, lies in our definition of love. If our definition is colored by Hollywood romantic love or best friend forever love, this statement will mean something markedly different from what its author likely intended.

We don't really know who the author is, but we do know a couple of things about them that help us as we try to understand their definition of love. While shared language and theological concepts have led many commentators over the centuries to equate the author of the Gospel of John and the author of this letter, modern scholars generally agree that while these works may belong to the same community, they are not the product of the same author. The First Letter of John was written as early as 100 CE and addresses a community in conflict. A schism has occurred

in the community to which it is addressed over the nature and work of Jesus of Nazareth. The solution, according to the author, is love.

However, this is not the easy love of best friends or the fated love of a rom-com, bound to work out in the end. This is the work of love – love lived in truth and action, as we discussed last Sunday. This is the kind of love that requires us to look another person in the face – a person we struggle with, a person we’ve fought with, a person we categorically disagree with – and see a fellow human being worthy of respect. This is the kind of love that believes hate is the *easy* way out. This is the kind of love that will flex all the muscles of the heart and mind and drain every ounce of strength we have to wield. This love is hard work. But as I look around the world, I see that it is exactly the kind of love we are called to share, for the sake of our world.

Like many others this past week, I’ve been watching the protests on college campuses around the country with growing interest and concern. Protesters have gathered *en masse* to demand an end to the war in Gaza and divestment of their universities’ finances and endowments from weapons manufacturers and companies with an interest in the conflict. Counter protests have followed. In some cases, classes have been moved online, in others police have been called in and arrests and suspensions of students have ensued. And students say that both anti-Semitic and Islamophobic incidents are on the rise as a result. Whomever you personally feel to be in the right, one slogan has stuck with me for days. A student said, “There’s one side here and one side of history. This is the right side here.”

Call me naïve, that’s okay, but I truly believe that protesters and counter-protesters alike are motivated by deeply held personal beliefs and experiences, genuine concern for the well-being of the region, and distress over the loss of innocent life. Messages like the one that’s stuck with me fly in the face of the words of our reading in the Epistle of First John; fly in the face of the author’s belief that God is love and loving God means loving our sisters and brothers; fly in the face of a love that that requires us to look another person in the face – a person we struggle with, a person we’ve

fought with, a person we categorically disagree with – and see a fellow human being worthy of respect. And yet, it is so easy to hear myself in the words of that student: there is only one right side, mine. After all, isn't that basically what public discourse has come to?

Our author, however, pushes us toward a better and more difficult way. Loving the one who is the personification of love, means loving all others – even the ones we disagree with most. They are still worthy of our respect.

In an opinion piece published on Friday by the Rev. Dr. Serene Jones, president of Union Theological Seminary and neighbor to Columbia University, the epicenter of some of the most contentious protesting, counter-protesting, and police intervention, Dr. Jones reflects on a Passover Seder held on their campus on Monday. She writes:

*It was wonderful to see Union's diverse community of Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist and spiritual but not religious students congregate and share a meal with Columbia's Jewish students. Together, they held a seder like those happening all over the world. There was prayer. There was quiet contemplation. There was laughter. I, like so much of the rest of the world in this moment, yearn for more Mondays...<sup>1</sup>*

She goes on to say that, “people are just looking for a common humanity – a way to stop the pain and make a difference. A way to find solace, together.”<sup>2</sup> That sounds to me a lot like the love we read about in today's scripture – the muscle-flexing, humanity-seeing, hard work love through which the divine is personified.

Jones continues saying that, “Unfortunately, rather than seeking to understand one another's perspectives and show empathy, many have

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<sup>1</sup> Serene Jones. “What I learned watching suspended Columbia students share a meal with my community,” Cnn.com, April 26, 2024: <https://www.cnn.com/2024/04/26/opinions/columbia-university-protests-union-theological-jones/index.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

claimed the moral high ground and attempted to quash any contrary opinions.”<sup>3</sup> The author of this morning’s text states that it is fear that keeps us from reaching “perfection in love.” Fear is, without a doubt, the enemy of love, the greatest barrier to love, the nemesis of peace. Fear keeps neighbors from talking, keeps rivals from discussion, keeps all people from growing. Fear says, there’s only one right side, mine. Fear says that if I disagree with you, I cannot love you and I cannot listen to you. But love does the hard work.

Friends, we are called to love – not love-pie-in-the-sky love. We are called to the hard work of love. It will take all the strength we can muster, all the tenacity we can afford, all the grit we have. It will exhaust us and it will change us. But it can also change the world. May we have what it takes to engage in the hard work of real love. Amen.

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.