

1 John 4:7-12 “Dear friends, let us love one another, since love is from God and everyone who loves is a child of God and knows God. Whoever fails to love does not know God, because God is love. This is the revelation of God's love for us, that God sent his only Son into the world that we might have life through him. Love consists in this: it is not we who loved God, but God loved us and sent his Son to expiate [atone for] our sins. My dear friends, if God loved us so much, we too should love one another. No one has ever seen God, but as long as we love one another God remains in us and his love comes to its perfection in us.” (NJB) Amen.

The book of 1 John contains one of the most foundational beliefs of the Christian faith—God is love. Yet, 1 John remains one of those little-known, obscure books tucked in the back of the Bible somewhere between the gospels and Revelation. As such, most of us know very little about 1 John: Who wrote it? Why did they write it? And what does it mean for us now? I had to do *quite a bit of research* about the circumstances surrounding 1 John in order to begin to understand the answers to those three questions. I found that, like most books of the Bible, we know very little about the author of 1, 2 and 3 John, although most scholars agree that he wrote all three of these epistles (1, 2 and 3 John) and was probably a leader of some kind in his Christian community, since he refers to himself as an “elder.” Over the centuries the elder, which is what he’s usually called, has also been thought to be the author of the *Gospel* of John, although most scholars now doubt that is the case. It **is** believed, however, that the writer of both John’s Gospel and the writer of the three epistles shared a similar or maybe identical

faith community and set of beliefs, since they both share such similar musings about God, Jesus Christ, and *especially* about love.

The location of the elder writing the three Johns was probably in Ephesus, which is in modern-day Turkey. Ephesus was a port city in western Asia Minor, was the fourth largest city in Rome, and held one of the original Seven Wonders of the World—the Temple of Artemis. Artemis—often called "Diana" in the New Testament—was among the most venerated of the Roman goddesses and played a huge role in the religious life of the Roman Empire. By the time the first century rolled around—about the same time 1 John was composed—Ephesus was at the height of its prosperity and Artemis was at the height of her popularity.<sup>[1]</sup> Ephesus and Artemis are even mentioned repeatedly Paul's letters in the New Testament; the book of Acts, about 40 years before 1 John was written, tells about Paul's life being threatened in Ephesus by an angry mob of silversmiths. Due to the boom in Christianity—which promoted belief in a **single and unseen** God—the silversmiths worried that in people started following this new religion, their income making silver shrines of Artemis would be over. People like Paul, and the elder of 1 John, were spreading a counter-cultural message about a single Christian God of love that was, needless to say, not well-received.

So in the middle of all of these circumstances--the culture and the issues of the day--the elder wrote 1 John as an essay or a sermon to deal what appears to have been a very specific problem, in a very specific community, during a very specific time. Although the *exact* nature of the problem was obscured long ago, since we know much of the context within which 1 John was written, scholars have a pretty good idea that the elder was ministering was a Christian community with beliefs that were the same as what we believe today—Jesus Christ was the Son of God, Jesus Christ was both fully human and fully divine, and Jesus Christ died for our sins.

However, the community **about** whom the elder is writing—when he talks about those people who fail to love God and fail to love others—appears to be a rogue Christian community that may have erroneously believed that Jesus was *not* both fully human and fully divine and that Jesus' death on the cross did *not* have anything to do with our salvation. The elder was trying to make sure that his Christian community didn't lose faith in *their* beliefs while living among all of the contradictory messages they were receiving in contemporary society. Sound familiar? Especially to the parents out there who are currently—or have in the past—been trying to raise Christian kids in a secular world? Same problems, different century. So the context in which the elder wrote was a time of prosperity, a time of religious change, and a time of resistance to counter-cultural beliefs. But even in the midst of all these challenges the *elder's* Christian

community wanted to bring a *new* word to the empire and a *new* way of living, based on Jesus' command to love one another.

In addition to all of that, Biblical scholar David Rensberger believes that the book of 1 John was also directed against opponents who simply lacked the belief and drive to follow Jesus' simple commandment to love. He writes, "1 John repeatedly insists that one cannot truly believe in Jesus Christ without truly and selflessly loving [others]...It is this insistence that 'God is love' (4:8) that has kept people interested in 1 John long after the circumstances in which it was written have passed into obscurity." [\[2\]](#) 1 John talks about our inability to see God, at least in physical terms; this inability, however, was the reason for Jesus Christ's ministry here on earth—so that we might know God through Him. The elder takes that fact to the next level, stating that the only way for us to see God—the only way for **others** to see God—is through God's love in us. In the introduction to 1 John in the New Jerusalem Bible it says, "The Christian's life must be centered on the **twin** commandments of faith in Jesus Christ as Son of God, *and* of love of [others]." [\[3\]](#)

So although the message of 1 John is timeless as far as most Christians are concerned—we know we're supposed to love others as God loves us, right?—it's easier said than done. Later on in 1 John, the elder talks about liars and defines

them as both people who claim to be sinless but break the commandments, as well as those people who profess love for God but hate other Christians.<sup>[4]</sup> He was very concerned about the message that was sending to non-believers as well as to brand-new Christians. I mean, who would want to become a Christian knowing that even the Christians hated one another, whether it was in first century Rome or in twenty-first century America?

Keep in mind that the community to whom this essay was addressed—and the community about whom it was written—was in existence only 70 years after Jesus' death and resurrection. However, even after seventy years, the church was still in the infant stages of its development, still struggling to find its footing and place in the world, still trying to solidify its beliefs and values, because they were living as the first generation *without* first-hand knowledge of Jesus Christ. The rogue Christian community, about whom the elder was concerned, was taking advantage of that fact by taking too many liberties with their faith; they were beginning to give God's love a bad name.

As I worked on this message I could not help but think of that famous song from my adolescent years—Jon Bon Jovi's "You Give Love a Bad Name." The opening lyrics, if you'll remember, go like this:

*Shot through the heart and you're to blame  
Darlin' you give love a bad name  
An angel's smile is what you sell  
You promise me heaven then put me through (well, you know..)  
Chains of love got a hold on me*

*When passion's a prison you can't break free*

The elder in First John desperately wanted the Christian community—the *entire* Christian community—to be a community of love in the spirit of Jesus Christ. Like Bon Jovi's song, the elder was deeply hurt by the way in which some so-called Christians were poorly expressing—or not expressing at all—God's love. He felt like he had been shot through the heart because this rogue Christian community was selling a promise of heaven—with an angel's smile; but by not following the Christian mandate to love, they were throwing away the opportunity to make disciples for Jesus Christ. But the amazing thing for the elder's community—the amazing opportunity they had—was to make a difference in the new world of Christianity by doing something counter-cultural by saying, "We are going to be a community that *loves others*." Like the words in Bon Jovi's song, "the chains of love had a hold" on them, and they were so passionate about the love of Christ that they would not by while other Christians gave God's love a bad name. So why do we? We see it around us all the time--on TV, on the street corners, maybe in our neighborhoods--Christians that use hateful words or actions while supposedly trying to spread the gospel. How can we expect to change hearts and minds if we allow other Christians to give God's love a bad name, instead of standing up for the love in which we truly believe?

Now I don't doubt that we've *all* made mistakes when we have tried to be loving—a loving friend, parent, spouse, child, or Christian; we don't always get it right—*especially* when we feel like our love is not returned or that someone is not

deserving of our love because of who they are or how they are. I'm sure we have all had moments we're not proud of—moments we regret that we were not more loving than we were; times it when loving was the *last* thing we wanted to do; because our human love is imperfect.

Fortunately, 1 John doesn't say that **you** are love; it doesn't say that **I** am love; it says **God** is love. We don't have to be perfect at loving, because **God** is perfect at loving! God *defines love*, and it is only in God—through Christ—that we as Christians know love at all. Because of God's gift of love to us, we are then called to share that love with others, even when we do so hesitantly, unwillingly, or imperfectly. Remember, God loved us before we offered any love back to God<sup>[5]</sup>—we are called to go and do likewise.

Listen again to the scripture, where the elder writes, in part, "Love consists in this: it is not we who loved God, but God loved us...if God loved us so much, we too should love one another...as long as we love one another God remains in us and his love comes to its perfection in us." That is a LOT of responsibility, isn't it—as long as WE love one another, God's love will come to its perfection in us? That should weigh heavily on our shoulders. What if someone is turned off from the church because we say or do something that isn't loving? Or worse, what if someone gets the idea that *all* Christians are un-loving because of what

they heard us say or saw us do?

Scholar David Rensberger writes, "First John insists on the inseparability of religious experience from moral conduct, with reciprocal testing of the...soundness [of one's religious experience] by the vitality [of one's moral conduct]...'knowing' God or 'abiding in [God] does] not describe an inward, mystical state but [is] concretely manifested by 'doing what is right,' 'keeping [God's] commandments,' or 'walk[ing] just as [Jesus] walked.'" [\[5\]](#) In other words, our Christian walk not just about personal morality and purity, or personal devotion and relationship with God--our Christian walk is about sharing God's love with others, while \*grounded\* in morality, purity, devotion, and divine relationship. Our relationship with God through Jesus Christ is *not just about us*--it's about loving others.

I don't know about you, but Christian loving toward others does not always come easily to me. For example, my husband Tasso and I love to travel. Since we have been together we have taken road trips to places like Savannah, Florida and Kentucky; we have flown to places like California, Jamaica, and my home state of Alaska; we have made plans to travel to places like Ireland and my father-in-law's native land of Greece. And while Tasso and I always very much enjoy being together in the destinations we choose, the getting there is not always pleasant. And as my husband will attest, it's not because of him. Any of you who

know my husband Tasso well know that he is one of the most laid back people you will ever meet; I know very few people who have ever seen Tasso get riled up over *anything*, with the possible exception of a bad call during a Georgia football game. Tasso gets along with most everyone, and when we travel together his cheery attitude colors our interactions with everyone from flight attendants to bell hops.

I, on the other hand, don't always enjoy such a pleasant reputation—I have *never* in my 30 years been called laid back; anyone who knows me well has seen me get riled up over lots of things; and there is at least a person or two out there who does not enjoy my company. And all these faults of mine are multiplied when we travel. For one thing, I am *not* one of those people that gets by on less than eight hours of sleep—I prefer nine or ten. So getting up after five hours of sleep, to catch a four-hour flight, to stand in line behind fifty other people catching the same flight, does not fall under the category of things I enjoy. Any perceived slight—a bad seat assignment, a cranky baby, an extended delay—puts me over my rapidly eroding edge. And my dear, sweet husband rarely escapes the scope of my wrath: If he takes too long to remove his ID, or if he isn't prepared with his 1-liter baggie of 3-ounce liquids, or if he's not ready to board the plane when I am...well, you can ask him yourself.

Then a funny thing happened last year—I was commissioned as a provisional Deacon by the United Methodist Church and became a Reverend. I was so enamored with my new-found title that I put it on nearly everything: reservations, letters, applications, you name it; even at our wedding my husband and I were introduced after the service as Mister and Reverend. In nearly everything I did, I embraced that semantic reminder of my accomplishments. But the next time I made a trek to the airport, I noticed I had listed myself as “Rev. Carrie Finegan;” suddenly, I realized that if I took out my frustration with the weather on someone who had no control over it, or if I snapped at the person in front of me for not moving quickly enough, or if I was rude to my husband because he didn't do something to my liking, that person behind the counter would see that Rev. Carrie Finegan—supposedly a woman of the cloth—was not acting very Christ-like. I was then *consumed* with the realization that the person behind the counter may then have believed—or worse, confirmed a previous belief—that Christians don't practice the love they preach. Not even the reverends.

If, on the other hand, if I took a cue from my much-more pleasant husband and chose instead to begin our conversation with a, "Hey there! Looks like you've been busy this morning!", or if I made a joke about the weather not complying with my plans, or if I smiled knowingly when my husband took 10 seconds longer than I did to locate his ID, then maybe—just maybe—that person behind the counter would see that Rev. Carrie Finegan—an *actual* woman of the cloth—was

practicing the love that Christians preach. Maybe that the person behind the counter may then believe—or better, confirm a previous belief—that Christians *do* practice the love they preach...*especially* the reverends.

Because it is one thing for me to have a strong devotional life and a close relationship with Jesus Christ. It's another for me to act like it. I ran across a quote a few days ago, something I had scrawled inside an old textbook from seminary. I have no idea where it came from or who said it, but I think it's profound: "You may be the only Bible someone ever sees." You. Me. Any Christian. Each day this week, I want you to try something--and I am going to try it as well--each day, let's ask ourselves--are we just talking the talk with our personal devotional life, prayers, and Christian beliefs? Or are we *also* walking the walk with our loving words and our loving actions toward others?

And isn't that the point the elder was making in first John? There was a Christian community giving God's love a bad name, and the elder didn't want Roman citizens thinking that Christians were an unloving lot. He wanted *all* Christians to practice the love of God in the way he and his community tried to practice the love of God, even if it was sometimes done imperfectly. The elder wanted all Christians to act as if they had the title Reverend in front of their names; or as if

they had a cross tattooed on their arm; or as if—they were Christians. The elder of 1 John wanted his Christian community to give God's love a *good* name.

The elder's efforts were not in vain—and neither will ours be. Remember the goddess Artemis whose temple was so prominent in first century Ephesus?

Well, several hundred years after the community of 1 John was first exhorted by the elder to practice the Christian love they preached, that temple of Artemis that had been a focal point of Ephesian culture and rich money-maker for the silversmiths, was replaced...by a cross. What will God's love do through *you*?

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[1] Harper's Bible Dictionary

[2] Harper Collins Study Bible

[3] New Jerusalem Bible, emphasis mine

[4] New Interpreter's Bible

[5] IBID, pp. 429

[6] IBID

[7] IBID, pp. 430