

“Rejection Free Zone”

April 28, 2024

First Christian Church

Scripture Text: 1 John 4: 7-21

God loves you. I know that is trite and painfully obvious, but I still need you to know that God loves you. It is who God is and what God does. And it is all God. God's love does not depend on our initiative or on our worthiness. God doesn't love us because we are so awesome, because let's face it, some days, many days, a lot of days, okay lately most days, awesome we are not. But God doesn't respond to us in love. God starts with love. We don't have to reach out to God or even believe in God in order to be loved by God. It is not about who we are. It is about who God is. And 1st John tells us God is love. We don't need to clean up our act before God can love us. We don't need to measure up to some standard in order to be loved. No, God showers love on us whether we deserve it or not. Matthew 5:45 puts it this way, "God makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous." Love is not a feeling of infatuation. Love is an action, and God's love sends the sun and the rain on the those who love Him and those who fight against Him. God's love is not dependent on us. That is what makes God's love perfect. It is not dependent on us as individuals or as a people. It is not dependent on our behavior or our worthiness. There are no if's, there is just God's love, amazing and active. God loves you.

But we also know one side loving the other side does not a relationship make. Otherwise an entire generation of middle and high schoolers would have been in a deep, committed, loving relationship with either one of Charlie's Angels or Magnum PI. But that is not how it works. A relationship is formed when two sides come together. Jesus is God come to earth in order to help form and make possible a relationship with us and God – individually and as a church. God's love is already there. Jesus made the way. But we still need to come to God's love through Jesus. It is the relationship that saves, and a relationship is formed when two sides come together.

Normally, the act of forming a relationship is terrifying. Once I decided to ask Amy out on a date, it took me several days to build up the courage to actually ask her. There is always that fear of rejection, because they have to judge whether you have potential, whether this is the right time, whether they are in the right place for a relationship and have the time, or if it just isn't right. With all that going on, there is fear – fear of rejection. But v. 18 say, "There is no fear in love, for perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love." The perfect love we are reaching toward here is God, for God is love. And what this verse means is we don't need to fear coming to God, because God already loves us. We don't need to fear God rejecting us, because God loves us first. We don't need to fear letting God in, because God loves us and only wants what is best for us. We do not

have to fear being held down, controlled and enslaved by God. Yes, when we let God in, there will be changes. Some things we thought were really important to us, even cornerstones of our personality, will lose their importance, and we will find ourselves becoming more and more like Jesus every day. But that is not from controlling, enslaving power, that is loving power. We are maturing and becoming the people we were intended to be. Becoming the people we couldn't be on our own power – because selfishness and greed, competing for attention and affirmation, collecting accolades and honors, treating love like a possession we have earned; these things will never harvest the fruits of the Spirit. “Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control” are gifts that come from the Holy Spirit working within us. They come from a relationship with God. There are many things to fear in this world: deer when driving at nightfall, that something bad will happen to ones we love, that current international conflicts will escalate and involve more and more countries, that the grocery store will run out of Moose Trax ice cream. There are many things to fear in the world, but coming to God is not one of them. God loves us first. God will not reject us, for God already loves us.

Where fear comes in, where it gets hard, where it takes incredible discipline is when the tables are turned on us. As the church, we are called to make God real on earth. Verse 17 says, “Love has been perfected among us in” God’s ability to love first and judge without rejection. And then it says, “As He is, so are we in this world.” Verse 7, “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.” At church we are the people who know God and therefore love like God – in a way that never leads to fear of rejection. Yes, as church we still judge right from wrong. We still judge between what is God’s will and what is the world’s fancy. I have been preaching weekly for almost 38 years, and I still find myself preaching to the preacher. There are always things I need to change, things I need to stop doing, start doing, do more or less of. There are well established thought patterns I need to change, greed I need to address, areas where selfishness is still winning over love. We are not to judge if someone is going to heaven or not, that is all God. That is the content of the verse, “Do not judge, so that you may not be judged.” But refining how we judge good and bad, evil and holy, is essential. Otherwise we are like a baseball coach who sees one of their players with her glove on backwards and another holding the wrong end of the bat, and doesn’t say anything. You gotta say you’re doing it wrong! Judgement is the only way we learn and get better. Both God and the church do some significant judging, but what makes it different is there cannot be an inkling of rejection in it, because perfect love casts out fear – fear of punishment and rejection. The church is to do it like God does. Love first. Embrace the person. Speak and act in a way that lets each person know they are loved and cherished. Then let the Word of God reshape and mold them.

I was talking to one of our members a while back and she talked about that. When she first walked in the doors, she was afraid. She and her new husband had what at the time felt like a significant age difference, and she was coming from a very different Christian background. She was scared of how people would respond to her. But the people here welcomed her. They pulled her into a small group. She and her husband were by far the youngest in the group, but they pulled them in, nurtured them, loved on them, were patient with them, journeyed with them through the challenges we all have as newlyweds and young parents. Lots of help, lots of advice was given, but always with radical acceptance and not an ounce of fear of rejection. In short, the church loved on them, and it changed everything.

Another member was telling me how she bemoans the church experience of so many of her friends. They get up the courage to go to church and they don't get that treatment. They sit down in an empty pew and suddenly all these eyes are staring at them. Nobody welcomes them or talks to them. They just stare. And of course there is the couple looking at them with contempt because this new family took their seats. How every time their child made a noise, all these frowning faces peered at them. This person loved bringing her children because when they were young and she was self-conscious about the noise they made in worship, people told her how beautiful the sounds of children in church were. "Just keep bringing them, they will figure it out." She told me how friends were told their clothing or their hair or their extra piercing or their tattoo or their lack of a marriage certificate was disrespectful to God; how their gender or their divorce or their inability to have children would always keep them a second-class citizen in church. She bemoans the fact so many friends have been completely turned off from God because they didn't experience the radical acceptance and casting out of fear that she experienced as a young mother. We now have the gift of her leadership in our congregation even though those earlier experiences were somewhere else.

Perfect love casts out fear. It casts out the fear of rejection. God does a whole lot of coaching. The Holy Spirit does a whole lot of judging and empowering change. There is a whole lot of coaching and empowering that happens and needs to happen in church. But there is no fear because the love, the acceptance, the cherishing comes first and permeates everything.

Verses 10 and 11, "In this is love, not that we loved God but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another."

Mike Van Heyningen