**Trinitarian Love**

1 John 4:7-12

Think of your **best relationship**. If you’re married, I hope you are thinking about your husband or wife. You might think of your Mom or Dad, or one of your children. You might reflect on a really dear friend who knows you and cares for you.

What is it about a great relationship that is so powerful? And why do relationships have the greatest potential to harm us? Both questions have the same answer: **relationships are both powerful and dangerous** because you are *letting someone in*. You are opening yourself up to be really known. If someone comes to really know you and they still accept you and enjoy you and appreciate you - there is nothing more powerful than that. But if someone who knows you instead turns on you in judgment and anger and attacks you - there is nothing more painful than that.

So imagine **walking into a new church** for the first time. Some of you today are like, “Yeah, that’s me!” Welcome! For the rest of us - just think what it feels like to step onto an unfamiliar campus with people you are meeting for the first time. Everything is new to you - the music, the people, the preacher (good luck!). You’re not sure about the theology and certain practices like miraculous gifts and healing and views of how the world will end and roles available to women in leadership.

In this new church, ***what is your POSTURE?*** Are you open arms, like this, just opening yourself up right away? Do you see how that makes you vulnerable? Sensing that danger, are you closed down, like this, arms across chest, hustling in and out, keeping conversations very shallow and brief? Probably you are somewhere in between these extremes. And this approach isn’t just related to a new church, it could be to a new Community Group as well. Do you walk in and open up about your past and your struggles or do you make sure to present only a really clean and polished surface to be sure people will accept you?

The exhortation of our passage today is very clear.

“Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God… Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.” 1 John 4:7,11

Our section begins and ends today with the clear command: **LOVE ONE ANOTHER**. Of course, this was Jesus’ main exhortation to his disciples before he died on the cross. ***He washed their feet*** and said, “That’s it, guys - love each other that way. That’s your example. Go and do likewise.”

Basically, **the message of Jesus** and the New Testament is this: LOVE. If you get this right and love each other, you’re good. If you miss this one, you missed the whole point. It’s about love. Period.

Today we’ll see three reasons why loving relationships in the church are so essential. Here is the first.

**Why loving relationships in the church are so essential:**

1. God’s **Nature** is love

“Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God.” 1 John 4:7

If we claim to believe in God and to follow God and to obey God, we are kidding ourselves if we aren’t trying to be like Him - the One who IS LOVE in His very being. Here is another key truth that separates Christianity from every other religion: the TRINITY.

The God of the Bible is the only Deity who can BE LOVE in His very nature because **He is Triune** - Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

* The God of Islam is monolithic - just one God, no Son, no Spirit.
* The God of the Jehovah’s Witnesses and Mormons is also not Triune - they deny the eternality and full divinity of Christ - so their God, in the end, is just like the God of Islam.
* Buddhism has no personal god - just a life force in all living things.
* Hinduism has millions of gods - but they don’t love each other.

Only the God of the Bible embodies love in His being! This is who God IS!

1. God’s **Nature** is love

“Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love.” 1 John 4:8

* The Father, Son and Holy Spirit are eternally **United** in self-giving, mutually glorifying relationship

The Trinity is a difficult doctrine to wrap our heads around. How God can be One God but Three Persons, does not seem possible logically, but it is the clear teaching of the whole Bible so it’s not for us to try to correct what the Bible teaches but to accept, and in fact to ***REJOICE IN God as He has made Himself known!***

This is not a minor, secondary point - it is central to Christianity and essential for the gospel. **ATHANASIUS** was the Bishop of Alexandria for 45 years, through most of the 4th century. He was present at the council of Nicea and was, in fact, chosen to write the rebuttal to the upstart deacon called Arius who stirred up the Roman Empire with his teaching that at some point in time the Son of God came into being - “There was a time when Jesus was not.”

What the Arian heresy essentially proposed was ***the simplification of the Trinity***, exactly as the Mormons and Jehovah’s witnesses did around 1500 years later. It is correct to say that these modern cults are not actually new but are just 4th century Arianism reincarnated and creatively repackaged. Even though Nicea agreed with Athanasius and denounced Arius, the simpler theology of ***Arianism eventually became the dominant belief in the Roman Empire***. The result was that five times, for a total of 17 years, Bishop Athanasius had to run for his life and hide, like King David, in caves and strongholds in the desert.

But thanks be to God, Athanasius never let up on this battle. In fact, the more the world turned against him the more Athanasius held his ground. At one point he wrote an open letter to the bishops of Egypt:

“To the Bishops of Egypt. Considering that this struggle is for our all… let us also make it our earnest care and aim to guard what we have received.” Athansius, c. 350 A.D.

Athanasius rightly perceived that the full divinity of Christ was essential to Christian belief. Halfway between the council of Nicea and the council of Constantinople in 381 A.D. that would finally resolve the question there was a small council that attempted a compromise saying that the Son of God was “like the Father.” Athanasius would not budge, even in the name of unity. **God the Son is not just LIKE God the Father** - God the Son is ONE with God the Father: of the same divine essence, with the same eternal existence, forever bound together with God the Father in the love and power of the Holy Spirit.

Athanasius fought for 45 years, at incredible cost and almost unending risk to life and limb, for this essential truth. Jesus is not less than God. He is FULLY GOD - true God of true God. This is the message we have received, and it is the truth we stand on and to which we hold fast. As we proclaim and defend this orthodox doctrine of the Trinity we are, like Athanasius, ***CONTENDING FOR OUR ALL*** (John Piper book about the Bishop).

1. God’s **Nature** is love

“Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love.” 1 John 4:8

* Failure to love reveals a lack of **Connection** with God

Since God IS LOVE in His very being, if we do not love one another it reveals a powerful truth - we don’t really know God at all! If you have come to know God’s love in Christ then ***you have experienced His self-giving, self-sacrificing***, all-encompassing, unconditional, eternally overflowing love, mercy, goodness and grace.

* Once you have felt the infinite mercy of God to forgive all of your sins - separating them from you as far as the east is from the west…
* Once you have understood the wonder of justification that God has given you credit for the righteousness of Jesus based only on your faith…
* Once you have experienced the power and life of the Holy Spirit moving in your heart…

You can never be the same! Those experiences change you forever - they change who you are! They change how you relate to the people around you. They enable you to love and serve in ways you simply could not before. God’s nature is love. Once you are born again as a child of God you begin to live and love like your Father in heaven. Since He first loved us, we love! His nature increasingly becomes our nature!

That’s the first reason that relationships in the church must be loving. Second:

1. God’s love is our **Life**

“In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him.” 1 John 4:9

***Imagine the conversation between God the Father and God the Son*** before Jesus said, “Let there be light,” and the universe leapt into being. At some point in eternity past the Father and the Son, illumined and bound together in the Spirit, said, ***“Let’s make a world.”*** “Yes, let’s make planets and stars and super novas and mountains and rivers and lakes and birds and animals and fish.” “Yes, amazing! And ***let’s make people*** in our own image who can know us and love us and be with us in relationship.”

At that point you could **almost feel eternity pause**, even though time is meaningless there. You could feel the tension as the Godhead looked ahead through time and saw the full sweep of history involving morally responsible, image-bearing human beings - the good, the bad and the ugly. You wonder if the Father laughed out loud at that point and said, “What a crazy idea! Can you imagine what a mess they would make!” And the Son looked at His Father and said, “Yes, what a mess they would make - and I would help them clean it all up.”

And so God **the Father created a world for God the Son**. And God the Son committed to redeem and ***restore that world for God the Father***. The Father blesses the Son with this universe. The Son blesses the Father by saving the human beings on this little planet who wrecked the whole thing. In turn the Father makes sure that the whole situation brings glory to the Son, who promptly turns that glory around and directs it back to the Father.

This is what C.S. Lewis calls ***“the dance” of the Triune God***. It’s a drama, it’s a relational interplay - a dance that had no beginning and has no end - but that we are invited to join. God sent His only Son to live and die in our world so that through Him we might live. Through Jesus we might be connected with the never-ending, overflowing LIFE of the Godhead.

Apart from Jesus, you will wither up and die. In Christ, you will live forever. God loved the world so much that ***instead of condemning the world*** for our rampant sin and rebellion God sent His Son to be covered in that sin and to pay for that rebellion so

* instead of giving us wrath He could give us love;
* instead of judgment He could give us blessing;
* instead of eternal wrath He could give us eternal LIFE!

1. God’s love is our **Life**

“In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him.” 1 John 4:9

* The ultimate demonstration of love is **Jesus**

If you ever question the love of God, just ***look to the cross***. If you watch the news or focus on your pain and the suffering around you, you may struggle to understand God’s good and loving plans. But if instead of focusing on the evil and suffering that is in the world, if you focus on the evil and suffering that Jesus took upon Himself on the cross you will see that God did the most loving thing possible!

The holy God of heaven who could have in all righteousness and justice condemned us for our sin instead chose to pour out that just condemnation upon His only Son! How can we question the love of a God like that? That is the ultimate sacrifice! That is the ultimate gift!

And that is **what love does**. It is what love looks like. True love gives. True love sacrifices. “Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends.” This is why stories of heroic self-sacrifice always move our hearts. This is why Captain America and Iron Man had to debate who would make the sacrifice play. This is why Darth Vader is a sympathetic villain and why Kylo Ren followed that same arc. Or if you want to come into the real world, this is why we have heroes in American history like Abraham Lincoln and Martin Luther King Junior who gave their lives for the cause of unity. This is why we celebrate on Memorial Day the thousands of men and women who gave their lives in military service to our country.

***When a politician promotes his own name*** and sings his own praises we rightly question if that is love. But when a local leader heads into the darkest part of town and starts serving the homeless and working with the addicts and making peace between the gangs… Oh, wait - we don’t have any examples of that in our political history, do we? Not in American Politics as far as I know. But in the history of Christianity, it’s everywhere. True love gives. It sacrifices. It takes risks. It lays down its life. American politics is the opposite of Christian life. The political agenda is self-glory. The Christian agenda is self-sacrifice. The two run exactly opposite to one another.

***Did Jesus come to make Himself King?*** No. He constantly refused to be made King and instead kept telling his disciples that he came not to be served but to serve; not to gain earthly power but to give up all of his power! And by giving up His life, Jesus gave us everything!

1. God’s love is our **Life**

“In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.” 1 John 4:10

* By giving up His life Jesus **United** believers with God

Jesus’ sacrifice of ultimate love not only ***turned away the wrath of God*** from us, but made us the eternal objects of God’s infinite love! Propitiation is a big word meaning that Jesus’ sacrifice satisfied the just wrath of God. Think of propitiation as a huge SHIELD. The wrath of God is going to fall, like blazing, white hot lava, and only those who are covered by the propitiation of Jesus will be safe. Jesus’ sacrifice shields us from the coming wrath because His body on the cross ABSORBED all of that wrath and punishment and suffering for us. Since God is just, He cannot punish the same sins twice. The wrath that fell on Jesus cannot fall on you! It has already been paid for. Jesus is your propitiation!

**This is LOVE!** Did God send Jesus because we were so amazing and righteous and loving? NO! Exactly the opposite! God sent Jesus because we were so sinful and rebellious and idolatrous and lost! It’s not that we loved God but that HE LOVED US by sending His Son to die for us. And look back at verse 9 - the death of Jesus not only paid the full price for our sin, it ***UNITED US WITH GOD!*** It bound us forever to the love and life of God Himself!

***“God sent his only Son into the world so that we might LIVE through Him.”*** Jesus came so that we might have LIFE and have it abundantly! This is spiritual, eternal life - but it’s also right now vibrant, powerful, overflowing love, joy, peace, patience - all the fruits of the Spirit bubbling up from inside of us like a spring of living water God has placed in our hearts.

Since we are ONE WITH JESUS, united with God in Him, we have every spiritual blessing in Him. All that belongs to Jesus is now ours in Him! **It’s a COVENANT relationship, just like marriage**. Before you commit to Jesus, if you’re just flirting with him, you don’t have anything that is his, except his interest in you. But at the moment that you say “Yes” to Jesus, committing your heart and life to Him in a covenant relationship, all that is His becomes yours! It is a marriage union - the two become one!

I always ask young couples - ***at what point are you married?*** When you get engaged are you married? No. When the wedding ceremony begins, are you married? No. The moment at which you are married is when you speak your vows to one another. As Westley explained to Princess Buttercup about her fake wedding to Humperdink - ***“You didn’t say it, you didn’t do it.”*** The priest just skipped ahead to say, “Man and wife,” but there were no vows so there was no wedding. How about that - even some good, clear theology in the Princess Bride!

At the moment you make your vow to King Jesus, **you become one with Him**. You are married. At that instant His love is yours forever and nothing can separate you from it. His power becomes yours, available whenever you will pause to pray. His Spirit comes to live inside of you, bringing all of the goodness, joy, peace and all the other qualities of God into your new heart.

And this is why Christians should have **the healthiest and best marriages** of anyone on the planet - because God’s love is INSIDE US - His life-giving, grace-filled, infinite love is inside us and should be sloshing over continually onto our spouses.

God’s very nature is LOVE! If we don’t love each other well in marriage it reveals how poorly connected we are with God!

* Christians should be quick to ***forgive*** because of how much we have been forgiven.
* We should be constantly ***serving*** because of how much Jesus has served us.
* We should love ***sacrificially*** because that is the example of Jesus and the way of Jesus.
* Even if the other person gives you NOTHING in return, you should be so **filled up** by the Lord that you can still give love to your spouse.

God’s nature is love and God’s Spirit is inside you! God’s love is your life - an unlimited supply of grace, power, goodness, joy, discipline, direction, and fulfillment. One more reason loving relationships in the church are so essential.

1. God’s **Glory** is revealed in our love

“Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.” 1 John 4:11

John concludes this section as he started it - by appealing to the believers as BELOVED in Christ and calling them to love as God has loved them. When we love, we reflect Go’s glory to those around us. Your marriage is actually not about you and your spouse at all. It’s about Jesus. ***What does your marriage say about Jesus?* It’s a billboard** - but what does it say? Does it say, “Look at how amazing Jesus is that I can joyfully love and serve and sacrifice for this man who would otherwise drive me crazy, and not in the good way.” Or does it say, “Jesus must be pretty weak and valueless because He can’t even help me forgive and love my own husband or wife.”

***The way we love each other in the church reflects DIRECTLY on the God we claim to believe in.*** If we love each other well, it glorifies Jesus. If we fail to love each other well, it dishonors the Lord we claim died for us and filled us with His life and goodness.

1. God’s **Glory** is revealed in our love

“No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us.” 1 John 4:12a

* We experience the life of the **Trinity** when we love

God is invisible. He is spirit. No one can see Him visibly. ***The only hope people have of seeing and knowing God is in and through US***. That is a humbling and daunting reality. The church is God’s billboard to the world. We are His plan A. And there is no Plan B.

Listen again to verse 12. “If we love one another, God ABIDES IN US.” We become the DWELLING PLACE of God tangibly, experientially, when we love one another. Theologically as Christians we are always the temple of the Holy Spirit. But the fact is that we don’t always feel or experience what is true of us. This is why other believers can be “God with skin on” for us to help us remember and feel His presence with us.

* When you go through **a painful loss**, you need the church family to surround you with love. You will struggle to experience God’s presence and love for you for a while apart from some physical arms hugging and holding you, some present human beings weeping with you and holding your hand. It doesn’t mean God has abandoned you, it just means your experience of His presence may be more challenging for a while.
* When you fail and **fall into sin** your temptation is to run away from fellowship - but that is when you need a brother or sister in the Lord to walk with you right back to the throne of grace. Why is it helpful to confess our sins to one another? First because James 5 commands us to, but also because it is healing to our souls. You can FEEL the grace-filled support of a brother who speaks audibly in your ear - “God forgives you. His grace is sufficient for you. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.”
* When you just **feel dry and distant** from the Lord, you need a believer to sit with you and pray with you. You need to borrow their faith and borrow their joy in the Lord until yours is rekindled. You’ll feel tempted to stop going to your Community Group or Discipleship Group, you might not want to open your Bible. But having that brother or sister in your life who will text you a verse and encourage you to keep reading and praying the Bible will help you walk through that dark night of the soul until the sun finally rises on your season of sadness.

When we love each other well, “God abides in us.” His presence is more tangibly FELT and seen in us. And look at the last phrase of verse 12:

3. God’s **Glory** is revealed in our love

“If we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us.” 1 John 4:12a

* People are **Attracted** to God when we love well

***God’s love is not IMPERFECT or deficient*** until we love - His love is always infinitely perfect. But our love MAGNIFIES that perfection - it helps others see how good and glorious the love of God really is.

Brothers, sisters, **what is the best witness** we can provide to the city of Tampa? The answer is ***OUR LOVE FOR ONE ANOTHER***. Our relationships are the best marketing tool for the gospel. Healthy marriages glorify Jesus. Healthy families glorify Jesus. Healthy community groups glorify Jesus. Mature believers lovingly investing in younger believers glorifies Jesus. A healthy youth ministry glorifies Jesus. A healthy children’s ministry glorifies Jesus.

“If we love one another, God abides in us and HIS LOVE IS PERFECTED IN US.”

***We have the opportunity to PERFECT God’s infinitely perfect love!*** There is more for God’s love to do by flowing through YOU this week! Someone needs a word of encouragement, a note that you’re praying for them, a cup of coffee or tea, a listening ear. Someone needs a helping hand, a ride to the doctor, some expertise that you have that they don’t.

***This is where the small church really shines.*** Big churches have to work really hard in trying to get people connected into smaller communities like ours. They try to create mid-size gathering and small groups so people can know one another and love and serve one another. Our church is built for that. We are a family church - a true COMMUNITY CHURCH. I hope you are feeling that, experiencing it for yourself!

One of our ***“small groups”*** here is notoriously and historically not small. They meet Thursday nights and love to chat and catch up and eat and discuss the Bible and learn and grow together. But if you ever visit this group (like all of our groups, I hope) you’ll be struck by how they LOVE EACH OTHER. Some of our more “mature saints” are in this group, and they sometimes need help around the house or rides to the doctor or meals on wheels or just someone to visit them at home. And this love for the saints spills over on other friends and neighbors.

Let’s pray.