

“THIS IS WHAT GOD IS”
A Sermon Preached at
FIRST UNITED PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
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(transcribed from audio file)

Today’s reading is from 1 John 4:7-12. Let us open our hearts and ears to hear God’s Word.

Beloved, let us love one another: for love is of God; and every one that loveth is born of God, and knoweth God.
He that loveth not knoweth not God; for God is love.
In this was manifested the love of God toward us, because that God sent his only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through him.
Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.
Beloved, if God so loved us, we ought also to love one another.
No man hath seen God at any time. If we love one another, God dwelleth in us, and his love is perfected in us. NRSV

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Today is my last day as a dance dad. I have been a dance dad for 22 years, since a little 3-year-old Ally stepped into a dance studio for the first time to take dance lessons. And now my youngest, Carson, is dancing in the showcase in Collinsville and so I will see him dance for the very last time this afternoon. And it’s a very weird feeling. You know? There are a lot of emotions going on. There’s a lot of things you are feeling in the moment. Then I realized how much money I’m going to save. I mean, it’s like my kid just got a huge scholarship for college called, I’m not going to dance anymore. But I’ll miss all of it.

As a dance dad you just kinda fill in for all sorts of things, namely involves, it’s a heavy prop and we need to get it on the stage. Can you help carry that on and off? Sure. Sometimes your job as a dance dad is you are just a taxi service. Quick! This one has to be here, and this one has to be there and we’ve got other kids doing other

things. So that's part of it as well. It's kind of part of my identity and it ends today. It's weird.

Those of you who have experienced an ending associated with your own identity probably know what I mean. Those of you who have retired, you might remember that last day of work. Now some of it might be like, I do remember it! It was awesome! For some of you it maybe was very sad. Maybe it wasn't even your choice. It kinda happened to you, but I think that you probably all had the experience that there was some aspect of that last day, that last meeting, the last class that you taught, the last bit of work that you did, that felt a little weird. To think that this is not my identity anymore and a lot of people have trouble with that.

Because along the way in life we pick up these identities, and when people ask you, who are you? Well, we usually start with our name and very quickly we end up telling them either what we do for a living, or what we used to do for a living. Our identity gets wrapped up in a lot of what we do.

This scripture passage today is breaking down the identity of God. I think sometimes God gets reduced to being the supervisor over a set of celestial rules and regulations and we come to think of God in that way, but this passage says most clearly, God is love. God **is** love! This is the identity of God. This is the way to define God. God **is** love!

When we were made and as it is told in the Hebrew scriptures in Genesis, it says that when God made people that people are made in the image of God. And I do not believe that saying we're made in the image of God that God has 10 fingers and 10 toes. I don't think it says anything about God's gender or skin color. The image of God is something else and I think that this passage points it out to us. The image of God, the essence of God, the full character of God is love.

You want to know God? Love!

You want to experience God in your life? Then love!

You want to feel connected with God because maybe some things have gone on in your life lately, where you don't feel as connected with God? It doesn't reside in suddenly becoming a rule follower. "I'm just going to try to be a good person. Maybe I'll feel more connected with God". It's not connected to any particular ritual of the church even. If you want to feel connected with God – love!

Your participation in love gives you the ability to know God and when we do not love, when love becomes an option on the dial of emotions and things we're going to do, when it loses its place at the center, then we lose that connection with God at our center.

Besides having the milestone of not being a dance dad anymore, this week on Thursday will mark the 20th anniversary of my ordination. Twenty years ago this week I became a pastor.

I remember it because part of that process of becoming a pastor, you have to stand on the floor of Presbytery, and they examine you. And I wasn't in the nice-y, nice Giddings Lovejoy Presbytery of the St. Louis area, kumbaya, let's all hold hands and just be glad Jesus brought this young man before us. I was at National Capital Presbytery in Washington, D.C. along with lots of professors and political people and they seemed to like to grill the candidates up there.

And so, there I was standing before this large assembly. I believe it was at the National Cathedral. It was one of the large Presbyterian churches there and they started asking me questions about - you mention in your Statement of Faith, Mr. Dyer, about the mystery of God and how it's all faith. It's not knowledge and that you had relied on knowledge in your life as an engineer, so tell us, what do you know, though, about God? Is there anything that isn't a mystery? I was so caught up in it, immediately I thought my words were so clever. I was like, "No! There is nothing you can know about God. God is a mystery. God is a god that we come to out of faith, not out of knowledge. So, no there is nothing that I can know about God, but there is much I can believe about God." Oh man, it sounded clever when it came out of my mouth. Oh, I was up there! I was going to be a pastor.

But they just kept coming up, one by one. "Yes, but I want to return to that one point. Is there anything that you know about God?" "NO!" I mean I doubled down, tripled down, quadrupled down on this.

Well, they were very kind at the end they said, "Okay. You can be a pastor: and they all applauded and all that. I remember walking down this really narrow hallway of this church and this retired pastor came up to me with his cane and he kinda stopped me. I was on my way. He stopped me in that hallway, and he put his hand on my shoulder, and he said "Son! God. Is. Love. That's what we were trying to get you to say. We were all just trying to get you to say that."

I went, "Oh Yeah. Okay. Thanks."

And twenty years later now, I would add something to that. God is love and that love has consequences. Simply affirming that God is love is not a stopping point, it's the beginning point of our response, of our living out that image of God. Because if God is love and if the image of God that is placed within us is that very nature and character and being of love, then we have the consequence of now becoming agents of love in this world. And when we do that, we actually make a space within us.

It says in the scriptures that when we do this loving of one another then God abides in us. If God is going to abide in us, then there must be a space there for God and I believe that when you and I engage in full, radical extreme love of one another, it creates a space within us where God can reside in our heart and continue to guide us. And when we hold back from love; when we get so confused about what we believe are the rules and regulations of life, we get so confused about what is right and what is wrong and we lose sight that it needs to come back, even in our efforts to uphold righteousness and goodness and certain actions, it needs to always come back to the essence of who God is, or else we will miss that. We cannot know God unless we know that practice of love in our lives.

It's hard sometimes to know exactly what to do in the moment, to recognize what is called for in the moment. It's good to have guides. It's good to have people in our lives, good people of faith who can guide us along the way.

It's also very hard being a dance dad because you watch those dances and you have no idea if they did a good job or not. There was a dance yesterday. Someone fell down in the middle of the dance. I didn't see it. I have been a dance dad for 22 years and I still don't know what it means when they say, "Ooh they had good lines." I don't know what that means. Did they have good lines? I don't know. I know there is something about you are supposed to point your toes. I know pointing toes is important. I still don't know it when I see it. I still, when I go to one of these dance competitions, I have a really great resource right next to me. It's called a dance mom and so at the end of the dance I just look at her and I'm like, was it good? I mean, it looked good to me and it'll be like, "Oh, they missed the jump. It was a little off and their lines were not good." I'm like, "Oh yeah. Those lines." But I can look to her, and she knows more than I do and she understands the essence of what's supposed to happen out there and that guides me in my reaction and actions.

In the same way God gave us his only Son, to give us a partner, a model to look at and we can look at situations and it's very easy to do this. You simply look at a situation and as these words are coming out of my mouth, does this sound like something that Jesus would say? Does this sound like something that God would

speak into this moment? This action that I'm about to do, this reaction to what is happening in front of me, am I about to act in a way that matches that example I have in Jesus Christ? Can I picture Jesus shouting at this person the way I am shouting at them right now? Can I picture Jesus in this moment holding back and loving and caring for this person in this moment? And if you cannot, then adjust that reaction because if we do not act out of love, our faith is empty. Our faith is just a bunch of rules and rituals, and we can come with all sorts of fancy knowledge and wisdom and think we just know so much. But at the end of the day, all the knowledge you can pick up, all the rituals that you could do, means nothing if we don't act out of love.

And so, as we go forth let's surround ourselves with people that seem to be doing that love thing and use them as examples. Let's remember that perfect example that we have in Jesus and let's just remember again and again that we were loved first by God and that love from God is so pure that the scriptures do not even say, God loved us so now we have to love God. No! God's love is so perfect and full and selfless that God's love asks us to love one another and in doing that God's intention for our lives which is love will be perfected in us.

To God be the glory.

Halleluiah and Amen.