

1 John 4:13-21 “No Fear” June 26, 2005

A Sermon by Pastor Brad Smith

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The sermon in a sentence: A community that loves God and loves each other has no need to be afraid, worried, or anxious about anything.

Why I am preaching it: So that the church will see how love for God and love for one another together drive out whatever might make us stressed, anxious, or fearful.

You will notice as we move along through 1 John that by now we are covering familiar territory. Today’s passage talks about acknowledging Jesus as the Son, and we remember the first strand of John’s strong rope: right belief in Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God. John says that whoever loves God must also love his brother and sister. There we have the second strand, of right relationships. He talks about the command of God. There is the third strand, of obedience, or right behavior. Many of you have the theme of 1 John memorized already: A healthy Christian and a healthy congregation are characterized by right belief, right relationships, and right behavior. This week he is picking up on the love, or right relationships strand of the cord.

But don’t walk out or drift off to sleep just yet, because John is adding something new in today’s passage. He has already mentioned love a number of times, but now he says that perfect love (that is, God’s love for us combined with our love for each other) will drive out fear. That is pretty intriguing. Think of the words that describe different aspects of fear: worry, anxiety, stress. Is it really true that we can live a life free of worry, anxiety, stress and fear? That’s exciting! John offers to us very ordinary Christians the possibility of freedom from the anxieties, worries, and fears that drag us down. In asking around the congregation the past couple of weeks, I found that the biggest fears were fears related to feeling guilty, fears of losing independence, and fears for our loved ones. John offers us freedom from those biggies. We will find that love is the road to that freedom. That is what this sermon will be about.

But John does not start out talking about loving God, but about living in God. Listen again to verses 13-15. [Read 4:13-15.] Organizing it a little differently, here is what he says: We live in God and God lives in us. This is

true because God the Father sent his Spirit. (Remember that God is a Trinity—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The Spirit is the person of God who lives in believers and who lives in the church.) We also live in God because the Father sent Jesus the Savior. If we were not saved, if we were still caught in our sins, it would be impossible for God to live in us, or us to live in God. What an amazing thought, to live in God, and to have God live in us, individually and as a congregation!

But what does it mean to live in God? If I tell you that I live in Makiki or Manoa or Waianae you know exactly what I mean. But what about living in God? These verses sound great, but they raise a big question. In practical terms, what is this living in God and God living in us all about?

The next verse gives us some help with our question [Read 3:16]. “And so we know and rely on the love God has for us. God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in him.” So living in God and living in love are the same thing. Remember that in the Bible, love is not a warm feeling, or a desire to be around somebody all the time. It is a completely different thing from finding a person exciting or attractive.

Love is the willingness to sacrifice what is of value to me for the benefit of another. Let me say it again. Love is the willingness to sacrifice what is of value to me for the benefit of another. John says that God is love, and that God loves us. He means that it is the nature of God to sacrifice what is of value to him, including his own Son, for the benefit of us individually and as a congregation. God lavishes his very best on us for our benefit. And you will notice in verse 16 that there are two things we need to do about the love that God has for us: We need to know it, and we need to rely upon it.

First, let’s look at the knowing part. Knowing does not come all at once. You don’t have to be brilliant to know most subjects, but you do have to devote time to them.

Before being able to serve in Venezuela I had to know Spanish. I had to listen to it, to study its grammar. I disciplined myself to read and even to think in Spanish, even if it was not natural for me. I practiced with other people. I went to people who knew more Spanish than I did to explain confusing points of grammar. And little by little I got to know Spanish.

There are certain tests that measure your language learning ability. They used to tell us in the Spanish Language Institute about one lady who scored extremely low on those tests. The instructors figured that she would flunk out. But she was clear on her call as a missionary. She was motivated, she was determined to learn Spanish. She was going to be able to communicate with Spanish-speaking people. She devoted lots of time to it. And by the end, she knew Spanish. She graduated far above what her entrance tests predicted. Motivation was more important than natural ability.

Knowing the language is a necessary first step, but knowing it is different from relying on it. If you ever took a foreign language in high school or went to Japanese school in the afternoon, you will remember that at the beginning level, the students will go through their exercises in Spanish or Japanese or whatever the new language might be. They have memorized some of the vocabulary. They have memorized some of the grammar. They pass their tests. But if they have a question, they ask the teacher in English. They do so even if they could have asked in the new language. At that point, the new language is only an academic subject and not something that they use in real life.

But eventually a change comes. Sometimes it is conscious, sometimes not. They begin to use the new language not only to do their homework. They begin to ask real questions; they come to rely upon the new language to give them real information that is actually useful for them. They realize that they can have a conversation with somebody who doesn't speak English. It is becoming part of their life. They have come to know and to rely upon the new language.

I think that knowing the love of God is similar. It takes time. We may not find that understanding the love of God comes easily to us. Maybe in spiritual things we feel like the lady who tested right at the bottom in language learning ability. We may not be naturally drawn to reading the Bible, to listening to sermons, music and CDs that will expand our understanding of the love of God. We may not normally think about the love of God. It may not always feel natural to join a Bible study, or a prayer group, or to ask people how they are learning to love God more.

But if we keep at it, we will find little by little that we will begin to rely on the love of God. We will believe that God likes nothing better than to sacrifice himself for our benefit. We will become convinced that we can take

his love into account when we are feeling guilty, or we are deteriorating physically or getting forgetful, when we are powerless to help our children.

Of course as we become more and more aware of God's love for us, we will want to love him back. That is how love works. But if love means sacrificing what is valuable to me for the benefit of another, then I'm stuck. What could I possibly sacrifice that would be of benefit to God? What do I have to offer that God wants or needs? Well, John understands our question, and in verses 19-21 he provides the answer [Read 3:19-21.]

Remember that hatred is the opposite of love. Hating my brother or sister does not generally mean that I want to kill them. Hatred means refusing to sacrifice what is of value to me in order to benefit them. If God lives in my brother or sister, and if I refuse to sacrifice what is valuable to me for their benefit, then I don't love either God or my brother or sister. John is saying that the primary way that I express love to God is by sacrificing what is valuable to me for the benefit of my fellow Christians.

So you see where John has taken us. Verse 19 says, "We love because he first loved us." God sacrificed himself for our benefit. We receive all kinds of love directly from him. In addition, his love serves as a model for how we relate to each other. That is the model of a healthy Christian congregation—receiving love from God, and passing it back and forth to one another.

And what is the result? That is what we find in verses 17-18. If you think of this passage as a treasure hunt, then we find the treasure in these two verses. Listen to them: "In this way, love is made complete among us so that we will have confidence on the day of judgment, because in this world we are like him. There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment, The one who fears is not made perfect in love."

The word "complete" in verse 17 and the word "perfect" in verse 18 come from the same Greek word. I think it is fair to translate verse 18 as "Complete love drives out fear," where "complete" means love flowing from God to the congregation, and love flowing back and forth within the congregation. Our love for each other alone is incomplete, and God has even made the world in such a way that his love for us alone is incomplete. Complete love includes love from him and for one another. But how does complete love drive out fear?

I think John chose his words carefully when he said, “drives out fear.” Fear is stubborn. It makes itself at home in us, and it will not leave without a fight. The past week or two I have been asking around in our church about what fears, anxieties, or worries Christians need to have driven out of them. Most of them fell into one of three categories: guilt or fear of having done wrong, fear of losing our independence, and fear for the well-being of our family members. Yours may be different, but the principles will still apply.

The more I think about their answers, the more convinced I become that we need both the love of God and the love of our believing brothers and sisters in order to drive out fear, anxiety, stress, or worry. Let’s look first at worries about guilt.

John confronts the fear of being guilty or condemned very directly in verses 17-18. “In this way, love is made complete among us so that we will have confidence on the day of judgment...perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment.” Are we guilty? Yes! Will we be condemned by God? No! Why not? Because God is love. He sacrificed what was valuable to him (his Son) for our benefit. Freedom from guilt is based in the love of God, but often we cannot believe it until we experience it in our congregation. When I mess up and my brothers and sisters forgive me, then I can believe that God has forgiven me, too. Sometimes I need to hear from others that God will not condemn me before I can believe it. I am not sure why it works that way, but it does. So that is the first fear, the fear of guilt or condemnation.

A second group of fears cluster around loss of independence. Especially as we age, there’s a growing sense of worry about our own physical and mental deterioration. Again and again you hear, “I don’t want to be a burden to anybody.” There is also a fear about not having enough money to last through to the end of life.

You may know that Oregon is the only state with an assisted suicide law. I thought that people would choose to end their lives because of unbearable pain. But that is not the case. The most common reason that people choose assisted suicide is the loss of independence, or the fear of losing their independence. It is a huge source of anxiety for a lot of people.

How can perfect or complete love, the love of God and of our sisters and brothers, drive out that fear? Many of us know the verses about the love of God that can comfort us when we face physical or financial loss—God will provide for our needs, God will never leave us or forsake us, everything we go through provides an opportunity for us to be more like Jesus. It is all true. God does comfort and provide. He does use hard times to bless us.

But he generally comforts and provides through our Christian brothers and sisters, so we need to be giving love to and receiving love from them as well. We were never meant to be independent, but rather interdependent. Even God is not independent. He is an interdependent Trinity, and he chooses to depend upon us to be the main instruments of spreading his love. Independence, not being a burden on anybody, are not biblical values. [Repeat.]

To live in love, to be a complete person, I must have opportunities to love--to sacrifice what is valuable to me for the benefit of others. You also must have those opportunities. So if my highest goal is to be independent or not to be a burden to anyone, or if my goal is to serve you but not allow you to serve me, then I am actually robbing you of chances to love, to sacrifice for my sake.

There is nothing shameful or wrong or abnormal about spending some years of our lives in need of some care from others, in allowing them to love us. And if we are the primary caregiver of another, there is nothing shameful or wrong or abnormal about expressing our need for respite and allowing others to love us in that practical way. Perfect love does drive out fear, but only if we let go of the fantasy of being independent of everyone else. We were never meant to go it alone. Our future does not depend upon us alone.

So that was a second set of fears, related to loss of independence. Another source of fear is the people we care about, often our children. When they are little we don't know if we are raising them right. As they grow up, they face difficulties, and we cannot be there for them.

But once again, we were never meant to be stand-alone parents. Those of you who were at second service last week remember Carlton Gushiken's testimony. He spoke about numbers of people from the church who served as parent figures, as role-models to him as he was growing up. Now others

are fulfilling the same role for his children, and he in turn is loving their children.

Our eldest son graduated from high school in Venezuela, and then moved to California to find a summer job and to start college. The first few days were terrible. He didn't have transportation, and it turned out that we had been unrealistic about the possibilities for summer work. We felt so badly for him, broke and discouraged, and so helpless. We were thousands of miles away on another continent, and there was nothing we could do.

I called a Christian family in California who had served with us in Venezuela earlier and asked if they could help out. They jumped in their van, drove to our son's college dorm, brought him home and fed him, listened to his anxieties, prayed with him, and helped him work out a plan for the summer. Interestingly, a couple of years later he spent a semester on the East Coast. By that time this same family had moved to Maryland, and once again they were able to love him in practical ways, to stand in for us as parents. We cannot be everything for our children or for our aging parents; thank God we don't have to be. God will love them directly, and if our Christian community is functioning as it should be, others will love them in circumstances where we cannot. We don't have to be afraid. We are not the only family that our loved ones have.

So there it is. We really do have the option of living without worry, stress, or anxiety. It takes time, but we can come to know how much God loves us, and to trust that love in stressful times. We can sacrifice ourselves for the sake of others, and just as important, allow others to sacrifice themselves for our sake. And we will find that God's love for us and our love for one another really does drive out fear.

Let us pray.