

The letter of First John reads more like a sermon than anything else.

It makes sense – after all, it was written to a particular Christian community at a particular point in time. Sermons are also messages to particular Christian communities at particular moments.

So, this week I read through the whole letter of First John.

And then I found a commentary on this letter by one of the preaching professors who most inspired me in seminary, who was creative and compassionate, and whose sermons sounded very much like some of the letters in the New Testament.

So, with all that in mind, this morning, I have decided to do something a little different. I am going to preach to you the first letter of John. I've done some editing and paraphrasing for the sake of length and clarity. And there are a few asides that you'll notice, to make the letter more understandable and relevant to our particular time and place.

But overall, this is the message that a writer named John sent to the early church; a message that is still important to our Christian community.

Please pray with me.

*God of all time, teach us through your Word as we find it in Scripture, and through your Word made flesh, your son, Jesus. Amen.*

This is the message of Jesus that I announce to you:

“God is pure light.

In God, there is no darkness at all.”

That is, God is truth and love and goodness. There is no sin whatsoever in God.

If we claim to be God's followers, but live in the darkness of sin, we are lying and do not act truthfully.

But if we live in the light of God, we have fellowship with each other, and Jesus cleanses our every sin.

If we claim, "We don't have any sin," we are lying to ourselves and the truth is not in us. But if we confess our sins, the one who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from everything we've done wrong.

This is why we continue to include Confession as part of our worship. It is one of the ways that we maintain an honest relationship with God.

My little children, this message is an encouragement to stay away from sin. But none of us is perfect. So remember, when you do sin, we have an advocate with our Creator: Jesus Christ, the righteous one. Jesus is God's way of dealing with our sins – and not only ours, but the sins of the whole world!

Did you catch that? Not just the sins of Christians or men or white people or other folks in power. Jesus is God's way of dealing with the sins of the whole world! Jesus is for everyone!

We show our relationship with Jesus by keeping his commandments.

Whoever claims, "I know Jesus," but breaks his commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in them. On the other hand, the love of God is perfected in whoever keeps Christ's word.

Whoever claims to abide in Christ – that is, to be a Jesus-follower – must live in the same way as he lived.

Dear friends, this is not a new commandment, but an old one that you've known forever.

If you claim to live in God's light, but you hate a brother or sister, you are not actually in God's presence. Whoever loves their siblings abides in God's light, where there is nothing that can cause them to stumble.

Whoever hates a brother or sister, though, is in the darkness, apart from God. They abide in darkness, and cannot see their way to God's presence.

Little children, this message is for you, because your sins have been forgiven through Jesus' name. This message is for you, because you know the Creator.

Parents, this message is for you, because you already know the one who has existed from the beginning.

Young people, this message is for you, because you are strong, the word of God remains in you, and you have conquered the evil one.

Do not love the things of the world. If you do, the love of God is not in you. Everything that is in the world—the addicting cravings of the flesh, the jealousy of the eyes, and the arrogant pride in one's own wealth and possessions—these things are not from God, but from the world.

And the world and its cravings are passing away.

Our earthly desires are fleeting.

But God, and those who abide in God, remain forever.

Little children, this is a critical time.

You've may have heard that the antichrist is coming. Messages opposed to Christ are all over. This is how we know that it is a critical time.

Those who are opposed to Christ claim to teach the truth. But because you abide with Christ, you know better. You know their teachings are false.

Let your faith dwell within you, so that you may also abide in God as Savior and Creator.

The promise we have from God is eternal life. Don't let anyone deceive you! Continue to believe in Christ!

Little children, abide with Jesus, so that when he appears we can have confidence, and not be ashamed. If you know that Jesus is righteousness, you also know that every person who practices righteousness is born from him.

Did you hear that? Not just the Christ-followers, or the Americans, or the rich people. Anyone who practices righteousness is following Jesus.

You can see what kind of love God the Father has given to us! For we are called God's children, and that is what we are!

Anyone who sins, rebels against God. In spite of our sinfulness, Jesus became incarnate to take away sins, and there is no sin in him.

Every person who abides in Christ does not sin.

And any person who continues in sin cannot know Jesus.

Little children, make sure no one deceives you. The person who practices righteousness is righteous, in the same way that Jesus is righteous. The person who practices sin belongs to the evil one.

Like Jesus told us – by your fruits, you will know them.

God's Son came to earth to destroy the works of evil. Anyone who doesn't practice righteousness and anyone who doesn't love a sibling is practicing evil.

You've heard it before: love each other. Don't be like Cain, who murdered his brother. And why did he kill him? Cain killed Abel because his own works were evil, but the works of his brother were righteous.

Love each other.

We know love because Jesus laid down his life for us.

Therefore we ought to lay down our lives for our siblings.

If someone has material possessions and sees a sibling in need, and they don't care – how can the love of God remain in that person?

Little children, let's not love with words or speech but with action and with truth. This is how we will know that we belong to the truth and reassure our hearts in God's presence.

Again – our love for others must take tangible form, as Jesus' love for us did. We are asked to love and give and serve, at risk of our own security, and even our lives. This is what it means to show God's love to others.

No matter how we feel, be assured: we can have confidence in our relationship to God. Keep God's commandments, especially this one: believe in the name of God's Son, Jesus Christ, and love each other as he commanded us.

Whoever keeps Christ's commandments remains in God and God remains in them. We know that God remains in us, because of the Spirit that God has given to us.

Little children, you are from God, and the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world.

Dear friends, let's love each other, because love is from God, and everyone who loves is born from God and knows God. The person who does not love does not know God, because God is love.

This is how the love of God is revealed to us: God has sent the only Son into the world so that we can live through our Savior. This is what love means. Our Creator sent our Savior as the sacrifice that deals with our sins.

Dear friends, since God loved us this way, we also ought to love each other sacrificially.

If we love each other, God remains in us and God's love is made perfect in us. We can come close to seeing God by seeing love in one another.

The basis of our faith is belief in the love that our Creator has for us.

God is love, and those who abide in love remain in God and God abides in them. Love has been perfected in us, so that we can have confidence on the Judgment Day, because we are God's presence in this world.

There is no fear in love, but perfect love drives out fear, because fear expects punishment. The person who is afraid has not been made perfect in love.

This is why we have those signs on our church door – no weapons allowed here. Because love casts out fear.

We love others because God first loved us. If anyone says, "I love God," but they hate a sibling or neighbor, they are a liar. A person who doesn't love a sibling or neighbor, who they can see, cannot possibly love God, who they can't see.

Let me say that again.

A person who doesn't love a sibling or neighbor, who they can see, cannot possibly love God, who they can't see.

This commandment we have from God: Those who claim to love our Creator must love their brother and sister also.

This is how we show the love of God: we keep God's commandments.

And so, dear ones, there are two main points that we can take away from the first letter of John.

First: Jesus Christ is the revelation of God in the flesh. True members of the Christian community believe in this with all their hearts.

And second: those who love God and follow Jesus must also show love to one another. This love is tangible, life-giving, and reflects God's desires for our lives.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu once said, *"Love can be demanding; in fact, more demanding than law. It has its own imperatives. Think of a mother sitting by the bedside of a sick child through the night, impelled only by love. Nothing is too much trouble for love."*

This is the kind of love that God has shown to us in Jesus.

This is the kind of love that God expects us to show to one another.

Let your love be extravagant, tangible, meaningful, life-changing, and selfless.

Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.

Amen.