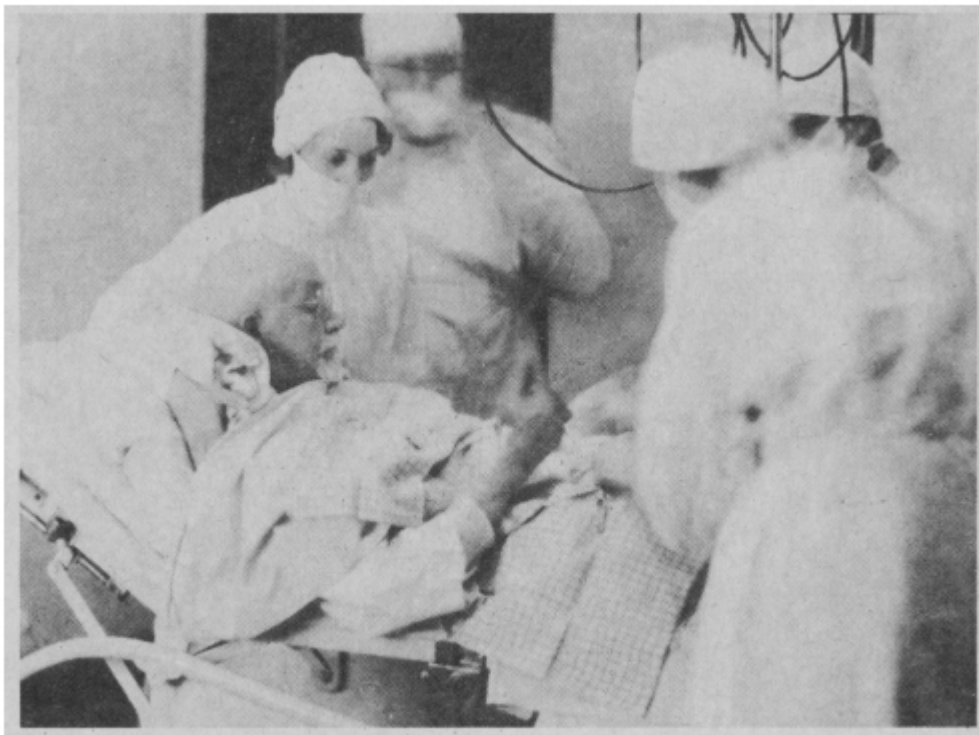


Being the Family of God *The First Epistle of John*

Knowing the Love of God *1 John 4:9 – 14*

Introduction: What is God's Love

This morning I'd like to reflect on how we experience the love of God, and even how we define it and encourage other people to experience it. How do you know God loves you? I'm going to state the case I'm going to make, and explain and support it all the way through. My case is that the love of God is revealed in how Jesus dealt with our sin, and that miracles of physical healing, answered prayer, spiritual gifts we have, and life circumstances – all the experiences we tend to associate with the love of God – are just aspects, hints, and shadows of that love of Jesus in dealing with our sin. They are important, but the work of Jesus in dealing with our sin is at the center of all we are, all we think, and all we do. Let me begin with a story.



Dr Kane performing the autoherniorrhaphy. (Photo courtesy of AP/Wide World Photos.)

This photo is a picture of Dr. Evan O'Neill Kane (April 6, 1861 – April 1, 1932) operating on himself at the age of 60. He is removing his own appendix. He did this on February 15, 1921. The reports I've read do not indicate that his appendix had ruptured. He didn't need to remove it. He just wanted to remove it. Why? Dr. Kane believed that general anaesthesia, which was always used in this procedure before, was more dangerous than local anaesthesia. He was treating other patients who had health conditions that made general anaesthesia problematic. In this case, the general anaesthesia was ether. Some patients could not be treated with ether. But before Dr. Kane could prove that local anaesthesia worked on his patients, he decided to be his own patient. In a sense, he loved his patients enough that he decided to become one of them. He wanted to experience surgery from the patient's perspective. Dr. Kane performed the operation with mirrors to enable him to see the work area. At this time, the appendix operation was much more major than today. Today, we use a modern keyhole surgery technique. Back then, the incision was much larger. Happily, Dr. Kane was well enough to be taken home the following day. ("Dr. Kane Recovering", *New York Times*, February 17, 1921, p.6)

The reason I share that story is because it helps us understand the love of Jesus. Dr. Kane performed many surgeries on people after that using local anaesthesia. He was able to treat people who had could not receive treatment before. Those were acts of love and service to other people. They were very significant. And yet, the surgery he performed on himself was the starting point. It was the decisive moment, the focal point, and the source from which Dr. Kane performed every other surgery. He took all the risk on himself first. He took the greatest risk on himself first. Every other surgery was an aspect of that surgery, a hint of it, a shadow of the surgery he had already performed on himself.

That is also true of Jesus. Every surgery – or transformation – that Jesus pours out into us by his Spirit is an aspect, a hint, a shadow of the surgery he has already performed on himself to root out sin. What do I mean? I'll make that clear as I go.

Relevance:

Let me speak to the relevance of this issue first. How do you know God loves you? The challenge for me – and perhaps for you as well – is that in any human relationship, when I ask if Ming loves me, or if my friends love me, or whatever, my strong tendency is to ask, 'What has Ming done for me lately? What have my friends done for me lately?' And so on. Then we project that onto God, and ask, 'What has God done for me lately?' Now on some level it's appropriate to ask, 'What have I learned about God lately?' But often, when we try to answer that question, we take our experiences in a way that is disconnected from Christ or not interpreted in a Christ-centered way. So we feel like God loves us if He answers our prayers. But if He doesn't answer our prayers, at least in the way we want, we feel like He doesn't love us. Or we feel like God loves us if He does miracles in us or around us. But if He doesn't do certain miracles, we feel like He doesn't love us. Or we feel like God loves us if life goes well for you. But if life doesn't go well for you, we feel like He doesn't love us. The problem with that is that the Holy Spirit tells us that the way to most deeply experience the love of God, and most accurately define the love of God, is to look at what God has done with our sin in the physical body of Jesus. He's done surgery on himself. Everything else that he does in us or through us is a glimmering, an aspect, a hint, and a shadow of what He's already done in Jesus.

Text:

The text I want to look at is 1 John 4:9 – 14. ⁹ 'By this the love of God was manifested in us, that God has sent His only begotten Son into the world so that we might live through Him. ¹⁰ In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation [cleansing and atoning sacrifice] for our sins. ¹¹ Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. ¹² No one has seen God at any time; if we love one another, God abides in us, and His love is perfected in us. ¹³ By this we know that we abide in Him and He in us, because He has given us of His Spirit. ¹⁴ We have seen and testify that the Father has sent the Son to be the Savior of the world.' We looked at this text in the Gathering three weeks ago and had some small group discussion on it. I wanted to return to this passage to explain it more. Let me tell you a little bit about John's first letter. John is reminding his audience of certain basic themes of who Jesus is and who we are, but also how we experience Jesus by the Spirit.

Jesus the Propitiation For Our Sins

So let's remind ourselves of what happened in the body of Jesus and why that's the key to understanding God's love for us. Verse 10: 'In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation [cleansing and atoning sacrifice] for our sins.' That is the key to understanding everything.

John says first of all that we did not love God. Now that is a little surprising because John was Jewish. He was part of the Jewish people, who tried to obey God for centuries. They heard over and over, 'Love the LORD your God with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength.' But John says quite bluntly that we did not love God, and by 'we' he includes you and me and himself and all his people. Maybe we want God to give us things. I wish I could go more into how John could say this, but for the sake of time, he asserts that this is the truth. We did not love God.

In this context of people committed to rejecting Him, God came in the person of His Son to be the cleansing and atoning sacrifice for our sins. That means on the one hand, he cleansed human nature, and on the other hand, he personally embraced the wrath of God. That is the same thing looked at from two different directions. God took to Himself a human body by sending His Son into the same flesh – the same corrupted, sin-infected human nature – that you and I have. Jesus acquired our disease. He struggled against it, more deeply and more acutely than we ever struggle against sin. And just like Dr. Evan Kane performing surgery on himself, Jesus performed surgery on

himself. With the spiritual scalpel of the Holy Spirit, he cut out all the self-centeredness in himself every time that disease spread. Sin was never in remission. Jesus was always fighting it. So, by the Spirit, Jesus forced his human nature to obey the love of the Father. In that sense, Jesus poured out the wrath of God upon the corruption in his human nature. It was the wrath of a surgeon against a disease in his own body. Jesus crushed it, and killed it, by going to the point where he even personally died. But we can also understand what Jesus was doing from another angle. He was cleansing the human nature he was wearing. He was loving it by healing it and transforming it and restoring it to what God had always intended for every human being. He reconciled human nature with God's divine nature and then brought his own body into resurrection life. Now, he can share his new humanity, his God-drenched, God-soaked humanity with each of us by his Spirit. The surgery he performed on himself is the basis for the surgery he performs in us. As Isaiah 53:5 says, 'By his wounds, [or by his stripes], we are healed.'

When we experience miracles, we need to interpret them in Christ-centered way. A 1993 issue of *Time* magazine had an article containing a story of a woman healed from cancer. The reporter writes:

Ann Cannady recalls the day in July 1977 when a third test result confirmed she had advanced uterine cancer. "Cancer is a terribly scary word," she says. Her husband Gary, a retired Air Force master sergeant, had lost his first wife to the same type of cancer and did not know whether he had the strength to go through it again. "We spent the next eight weeks scared and praying, praying and scared," says Ann. "I kept begging God, saying, 'Please, if I'm going to die, let me die quickly. I don't want Gary to have to face this again.'"... One morning, three days before she was to enter the hospital for surgery, Gary answered the doorbell. Standing on the step was a large man, a good inch taller than her 6-ft. 5-in. husband. "He was the blackest black I've ever seen," Ann says, "and his eyes were a deep, deep azure blue." The stranger introduced himself simply as Thomas. And then he told her that her cancer was gone.

"How do you know my name, and how did you know I have cancer?" stammered Ann. Then she turned to her husband and asked, "What do we do, Gary? Should we ask him in?" Thomas came inside and again told them she could stop worrying. He quoted scripture to them – Isaiah 53: 5: "...and with his stripes we are healed." Ann, still confused, looked at the man and demanded, "Who are you?"

"I am Thomas. I am sent by God."

Next, Ann recalls, "he held up his right hand, palm facing me, and leaned toward me, though he didn't touch me. I'm telling you, the heat coming from that hand was incredible. Suddenly I felt my legs go out from under me, and I fell to the floor. As I lay there, a strong white light, like one of those searchlights, traveled through my body. It started at my feet and worked its way up. I knew then, with every part of me -- my body, my mind and my heart -- that something supernatural had happened."

She passed out. When she awoke, her husband was leaning over her asking, "Ann, are you alive?" and pleading for her to speak to him. Thomas was gone. Ann, still weak from the encounter, "crawled over to the telephone and called my doctor's office and demanded to speak to him right that minute. I told him something had happened, and I was cured, and I didn't need surgery. He told me stress and fear were causing me to say things I didn't mean."

In the end they reached a compromise. Ann would show up at the hospital as scheduled, but before the operation the surgeons would do another biopsy. They would keep her on the operating table at the ready. If the preliminary test came back positive they would proceed as planned. When Ann woke up, she was in a regular hospital room, the doctor at her bedside. "I don't understand what's happened," he said, "but your test came back clean. We've sent the sample off to the lab for further testing. For now, though, you appear to be in the clear."

There has been no recurrence of the cancer. At first Ann was hesitant to talk about it for fear that people, including her children, would think she'd "lost it." They didn't. Even her doctor, she says, acknowledged at one point that he'd "witnessed a medical miracle."¹

What an amazing answer to prayer. Do we want to see more of that? Yes! Do we want to pray for more people we know to be healed? Yes! Do we want to pray for God to heal others we barely know? Yes! Do we want to say that God showed love to Ann Cannady? Yes, but... YES BUT...and I mean this emphatically: Even if Ann Cannady had died of cancer, years ago, God's love towards her would be just as strong and passionate. Even if I die of a horrible disease, God's love towards me would be just as strong and passionate. We are not at liberty to interpret it

¹ from "Angels Among Us", *Time Magazine*, by Nancy Gibbs; Sam Allis/Boston, Nancy Harbert/Angel Fire and Lisa H. Towle/Raleigh, with other bureaus Monday, Dec. 27, 1993

otherwise. In fact, a final draft of a new book coming out about this, called *Heaven on Earth*, says, 'Although Ann is eternally grateful her life was spared, she does not try to understand God's miracle. "All I know is that it's not for me to question," says Ann. "It is up to me to live my life as an example, in faith. In this life we don't have all the answers... just questions and discoveries.'" (<https://www.facebook.com/notes/the-final-draft/heaven-on-earth/110932418938168>)

Every other act of God's love is a fragment, a glimmer, a hint, and a shadow of the love of God that is found in Jesus. It is a fragment because we in our bodies experience being healed of a sickness, but Jesus in his body experiences being healed of sin and death, the ultimate sicknesses. It is a glimmer like an image in a pool of rippling water because we see a reflection of something above, casting the reflection. It is a hint because we taste hors-d'oeuvres and we smell the banquet but it is not fully here. It is a shadow because we see a dark outline but we must also turn to see the full color, three dimensional person who cast the shadow, and our eyes must get used to him. When God answers prayer with a 'yes,' it is a fragment of the 'yes' He has said to us and to all humanity in the physical body of Jesus. When God heals a person of disease, it is an echo of the healing that He gives each person in the person of Jesus and through Jesus by the Spirit.

The truth is: When God appears to heal someone or does a miracle, it is not just for the individual who receives the miracle. It is for everyone. Why is it for everyone? Because the miracle confirms who Jesus is. And Jesus is the Savior of all humanity (1 Jn.4:14) because he has the cure for the disease in all humanity. So every miracle must be interpreted not just as God's love for that particular person, but as confirming who Jesus is, which confirms God's love for all humanity.

This gets us to the difficulties or challenges to thinking about the love of God in a Christ-centered way. How is it possible to know the love of God this way more and more?

We Need to Remember that Death is Ultimately Offensive to God

The first challenge is that we underestimate human death. So we need to appreciate how offensive death is to God. If a person lives a long life and dies a peaceful death at a ripe old age, we think that that's a full life. We think that more life in this mortal body is enough. But in God's view, that is not true. Human death is the consequence of human sin. Death is the ultimate intruder in human affairs and the ultimate weapon of Satan (Heb.2:14). There is no such thing as a peaceful death because every human death is a violence that Adam and Eve brought into God's creation and a disruption of God's plan for each person. So every human death is hated by God. Even the process of human aging where our bodies start to deteriorate and fall apart is hated by God because that is the process of dying. I suspect that as much as God rejoices in the conception of every human being, He weeps because from the moment we become living beings, we also become dying beings. Ann Cannady will die a mortal death, if she hasn't died already. That is why God defeated human death when He raised Jesus from the dead. It is not enough for God to give us more of the same dying mortal life that we experience now. He does not just want to give us more of the same. He will give us the new resurrection life that now fills Jesus' physical body. 'By his stripes we are healed,' healed of death itself.

We Need to Remember Our Sin

How else can we know the love of God as found in Jesus? The second challenge is that we underestimate our sin, specifically our resistance to loving others. The reason why John is making this point about Jesus is because he is talking about loving one another. In v.7 – 8, John says, 'Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. The one who does not love does not know God, for God is love.' Then in v.11, he says, 'Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.' Then again in v.21, he says,²¹ 'And this commandment we have from Him, that the one who loves God should love his brother also.' And what is this 'love of God'? It's concentrated in Jesus and then given to us by the Spirit. Jesus sets the standard for what God's love is and how God has already shown it.

It would be really problematic if we said, 'I only experience the love of God through miracles, or answered prayer, or my emotions, or my circumstances.' If we did that, then we would be really inconsistent in loving others because there are always times that the Lord does not do miracles, or answer prayer the way we thought, and so on. We would only love others when we felt like God was loving us in those ways. In effect, we would be blaming God for our lack of love. But the reason why John points to Jesus' experience as primary and not our experience as primary is to leave our sin with no excuse. When Jesus was dealing with sin in the most intense moment, at the cross, he did

not experience miracles of deliverance from the cross; he did not even pray for deliverance; he was not at his emotional high point; and he certainly did not like his circumstances. Yet that is the very point at which he was loving us the most, and bringing his love for us to its deepest and fullest expression. And God loved us in Jesus when we did not love Him. That's important to remember. The Spirit moves in us when we are willing, when we ask, and when we love God. But Jesus came to earth when we were not willing, when we did not ask, and when we did not love God. Knowing that love in Christ is what tends to stabilize us and our love for others. 'By his stripes we are healed,' healed of our resistance to loving. We must still do battle within ourselves against our selfishness. But fundamentally, there is a new, God-soaked human nature that is in Jesus which he shares with us by the Spirit.

Illus: A few months ago, a young sophomore woman started coming to the Christian Fellowship meetings. Her boyfriend had cheated on her, and she was devastated. They had broken up. Some Christian friends of hers knew that I was speaking on the topic of suffering, so they invited her and she came. A few weeks later, I asked her to meet up, and we did. She shared her story with me. She said, 'I came to Jesus because I wanted him to solve my problems. Now I just want to know who he is.' I thought, 'Wow, this is real for her!' And then she said, 'I'm forgiven my ex-boyfriend and told him that. I don't want to get back together with him, but I did forgive him and I continue to forgive him, because I want to be a Christian now.' I think the Spirit of Jesus is at work in her, and that she's off to a great start.

We Need to Remember that the Spirit Loves Jesus

How else does this passage help us know and experience the love of God? Third, it helps us understand the Spirit's love for Jesus. We tend to underestimate the Spirit's love for Jesus. In v.13, John talks about what the Spirit does in us: ¹³ 'By this we know that we abide in Him and He in us, because He has given us of His Spirit.' The Spirit helps us to know that we are in Jesus and that Jesus is in us. In other words, the Spirit is Christ-centered.

Illus: In one week's time, our friends Phil Hou and Amy Tang will stand before one another, recite their wedding vows, and become husband and wife. When they do, they will give each other wedding rings. Now those wedding rings mean something: endless commitment and endless devotion and endless love. But the rings don't really point to themselves. They point back to the people who gave those rings. Phil has prepared his very self for Amy at some cost to himself. Amy has prepared her very self for Phil at some cost to herself. They have prepared themselves for this commitment, devotion, and love. The rings express that, and bring the other person into that love.

In that sense, Jesus prepared his own human nature to be fully joined to God in his own body. He perfected that union, at great cost to himself. He gives his Spirit to express that, and bring other people into that love. The Spirit points to the one, Jesus, who has prepared his very self to be joined to us, to join us to the Father. The Spirit helps us know that we are one with Jesus. That's why John had said in v.9 that 'the love of God is manifested in us.' Why is that important? Because God and humanity are married to each other in only one place – the physical body of Jesus. Jesus has the life of his new humanity in himself, and that, Jesus said that the Spirit will take of his and disclose it to us (Jn.16:14). The Spirit doesn't ultimately point to himself. He says, 'Let me help you to live in Jesus, to connect with Jesus' reality.' Everything we experience of being united with God is a fragment, a glimmer, a hint, and a shadow of God uniting himself with humanity in Jesus' body.

We Need to Remember that Jesus is not Just a Role Model

Fourth, we underestimate Jesus himself. Jesus is not just a 'role model.' Sometimes we make Jesus into a role model for *behavior*. There is some truth to that, and you can look at Jesus that way, but that is incomplete. The caution is that a half-truth masquerading as the full truth is not the truth. Jesus is not *just* a role model. In charismatic circles, we can do the same. Sometimes we make Jesus into a role model of how to be filled with the Spirit. There is some truth to that, and you can look at Jesus that way, but that is incomplete. And a caution is that a half-truth masquerading as the full truth is not the truth. Jesus is not *just* a role model. There is something he did which none of us can do. He did something for us that we could not do for ourselves. He made unholy humanity compatible with the Holy Spirit, so the Holy Spirit can live in humanity. So he is not *just* a role model. In v.14, John writes, 'We have seen and testify that the Father has sent the Son to be...' what? The *role model* for the world? No. 'The *Savior* of the world.' Jesus is the surgeon who became his own patient to provide us with the antidote for the disease we all share. That antidote is *himself* in the person of his Spirit.

Illus: Some time ago, at Boston College where I work, a young man came to the winter retreat that the Asian Christian Fellowship puts on. He was not a Christian. He wasn't even sure why he was there. But the depression

that he had been experiencing was getting thicker and heavier upon him than ever before. He could not even smile at people. On the second night, we had a time of prayer. A friend of his came up and prayed for him. He wanted to mock this prayer. But all of a sudden the smirk on his face turned to amazement and genuine joy as he felt his depression lift from his shoulders. His head became clear. He felt more alive and energetic than he had in years. At that moment, he knew that there was some kind of god who touched him. When we got back to campus, he asked me to meet with him. He didn't know what to do with his experience. He needed interpretation. Specifically, why Jesus? Why not just believe in a generic god? And then Jesus can just be a 'role model' of sorts. I sat with him, and over the course of several weeks, told him all the things I'm telling you now. Along the way, I learned that his depression was probably the result of post-traumatic stress syndrome because of some violence that he was involved with back in high school. I told him I thought Jesus had lifted that from him as a symbol of how he wanted to lift sin and selfishness from him. The miracle was a fragment of something larger and deeper. I said, 'Jesus is our savior, everyone's savior. He is not just a role model.' The reason why he wrestled with that was because he enjoyed writing and was on his way to being a successful writer. And he felt that to succeed as a writer, he needed to be kind of dark. I read some of his writing, and it was good. It was insightful into human experience, and edgy, but also moody and hopeless. It was dark. He didn't want to come to Jesus because there was too much resolution with Jesus, too much hope, and too much closure, he felt. He was concerned, and maybe legitimately concerned, that his career chances would suffer. 'Will Jesus change my writing?' he asked. I said this, 'I think your insights into human nature are really good. The types of struggles you talk about are awesome. And my guess is that you'd probably still write things like this. There have been many Christian writers who have, like Dostoyevski in *Crime and Punishment*. But I do think that Jesus will broaden your writing. I think if you give yourself to him you will experience healing and salvation, and that you'll start to want to tell that story as well.' This young man took over a year to really settle the question of Jesus. We met then, and he said, 'I believe in Jesus. And you're right. Jesus did change my writing. But I'm glad.'

Conclusion

How do we know God loves us? Because of Jesus. What Jesus did with our sin, for us, on our behalf defines the love of God. Everything else is an aspect, a glimmer, a hint, and a shadow of how Jesus loved us.