

1 John 4:7-21 N.T. 226 (NRSV)

⁷Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. ⁸Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. ⁹God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. ¹⁰In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. ¹¹Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. ¹²No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.

¹³By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit. ¹⁴And we have seen and do testify that the Father has sent his Son as the Savior of the world. ¹⁵God abides in those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God, and they abide in God. ¹⁶So we have known and believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. ¹⁷Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness on the day of judgment, because as he is, so are we in this world. ¹⁸There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. ¹⁹We love because he first loved us. ²⁰Those who say, "I love God," and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. ²¹The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.

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“The Purest Love”

Opening Prayer: Please bow with me in prayer. Glorious God, we come into your presence longing for you to feed us. Through your grace, allow us to hear and understand your Word of Life today. In Jesus’ Name we pray, **Amen.**

Introduction: **How many of you** know what I mean when I say, ***“It’s just like motherhood and apple pie?”*** It means that everyone agrees that whatever I’m comparing to motherhood and apple pie is just as good, just as wholesome, and just as pure as they are. No person in their right mind would ever say anything against motherhood and apple pie.

Today is Mothers’ Day, a day when we honor the goodness of our mothers and the sanctity of our homes. Today is one of those days everyone agrees is good. Mothers’ Day is as American as baseball and apple pie. **In fact, congress** first passed a law declaring the second Sunday in May as Mothers’ Day way back in 1914. **President Woodrow Wilson** declared Sunday, May 9, 1914 as the first national observance of Mothers’ Day, which was exactly 106 years ago yesterday. Back then, Mother’s Day was a day for citizens to fly their flags to honor those mothers whose sons had died in the war. **Today, we’ve expanded Mothers’ Day** into a day when we honor all of our mothers, be they living or dead. Everyone has a mother and no can ever say anything bad about Mothers’ Day—other than maybe this year when the pandemic is preventing lots of people from visiting their mothers. Nevertheless, one of the purest expressions of love in all of creation is the love between a mother and her child. **Yes, today** is a day that’s just like motherhood and apple pie.

PAUSE

Move I.

As pure as a mother's love is, it's still imperfect. While it's good that we honor our mothers on this special day, that doesn't mean that we should **set them up on a pedestal.** We need to make sure that while we obey the fifth of God's great Ten Commandments that we don't slip into breaking the first. **The fifth commandment** is to **"honor your father and mother"** (Exodus 20:12, NRSV). Celebrating Mothers' Day is one of the ways that we keep this commandment. Today we honor our mothers, and next month on June 21st, we'll honor our fathers. But as we honor our parents, we need to be careful that we also obey the first commandment, where God commands us saying, **"You shall have no other gods before me"** (Exodus 20:3, NRSV). To honor your mother and father does not mean to set them up on a pedestal and worship them as your gods.

Today, and every day, we should honor our mothers. We should hold our mothers in high regard and respect them for who they are. A mother's job is never easy. But in our sentimentality, we must never cross the line into worshipping our mothers. That's the balance we have to strike when we gather each year in worship on Mothers' Day. As we honor our mothers on Mothers' Day, we have to remember that our mothers, just like us, are only human.

I know a lot of mothers and their children are disappointed that they can't go to church together for worship this year. On-line worship is better than nothing, but it's just not the same things as in-person worship. **Most years Mother's Day** has the third highest worship attendance coming in just behind Christmas and Easter? This's good, after all Mothers' Day is like *"motherhood and apple pie"* **even in the middle of a pandemic.**

V

V

But I have to tell you Mothers' Day isn't an easy day for us preachers. While we preachers want to honor our mothers just like everyone else, we must remember that as good as it to honor our mothers, **we're really here to worship God.** We mustn't break the first commandment while keeping the fifth. A Mother's Day sermon can't just be about the blessings and virtues of mothers, it has to be about God.

The Discipleship Ministries board of The United Methodist Church publishes worship planning helps for worship leaders for each Sunday throughout the Christian year. In the Christian year, today is the **fifth Sunday of Easter.** This is the advice the General Board of Discipleship gives for today:

The primary celebration for Sunday is always the Lord's Day, and in particular for this day, the continuation of Eastertide—the season of celebration, formation, and calling for ministry in the name of our risen Lord. Let these larger purposes for this day in this season and the Scriptures for this day provide the basic framework that guides you in how you plan your worship. Mother's Day is important, but should not take center stage during worship.

So as important as today is, Mothers' Day is a secular holiday, not a religious holiday. In no way do we want to minimize the value of mothers. **John Wesley**, the founder of Methodism, once wrote that he learned more about Christianity from **his mother Susanna** than he did from all of the theologians in England.¹ A good mother even nurtures her children's spiritual life. Yet a mother's love is not a substitute for God's love. **As pure as a mother's love is, we must remember it isn't perfect.**

End I.

¹ John Wesley (1703–1791) of his mother, Susanna (1669–1742).

Move II.

And the Bible tells us God's love is the purest love of all. As pure as our mother's love is, God's love is even purer. After all, God is the source of all love. We can love because God created us to be capable of loving. To be capable of love is part of what it means for God to have created us in God's own image. **The Bible is a book** that tells us about God. The Bible tells us that God is the creator of all of the heavens and the earth and all of the creatures roaming the surface of earth and swimming beneath the seas. We can't see God, but the Bible introduces God to us and tells us what God's like.

I want you all to complete the following sentence. **God is (blank).** Go ahead and fill in the blank. Shout it out! (Wait for responses.) Yes, God is **love**. God's essence, God's being; God true nature is that of love. How do we know that? Well I'm sure you all remember the little kid's songs "**Jesus Loves Me.**" The chorus goes like this,

Yes, Jesus loves me.
Yes, Jesus loves me.
Yes, Jesus loves me.
The _____ (what?)

"**The Bible tells me so.**" Yes, the Bible tells us that God loves us. The Bible tells us that God's true nature is that of love. That's the central message of our Bible lesson today here in fourth chapter of **Saint John's first epistle**. In the last part of **1 John 4:16b (NRSV)** we read, "**God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides on them.**" Notice that John doesn't say that, "God is loving." What John says is **God is love.** John describes God and love as being one in the same. There are many verses in the Bible describing God. **God is mighty** (Job 36:5). **God is holy** (Ps 99:9). **God is merciful** (Deut 4:31). **God is spirit** (John 4:24). **God is faithful** (1 Cor 10:13). **God is just** (2 Thes 1:6). But only here in 1 John are we told that **God is love** (1 John 4:8 and 16).

Now, while we say, “**God is love,**” we don’t say, “**Love is God.**” The original statement isn’t some **arithmetic problem** where the reflexive rule applies. While this may seem like a subtle distinction, it’s an important one. To turn the statement around and say “**love is God**” is to break the second commandment. To say, “love is God” is **to turn love into an idol**. Love becomes the object of your worship rather than the source of all love, God. That’s what would happen if we were to slip up and let Mother’s Day become a day to worship mothers. We’d become a bunch a mushy sentimentalist.

There’s a song by Todd Vaters and Amanda Stott whose words go like this:

**This is love,
hanging on a tree,
for all the world to see,
holy sacrifice.
This is love,
perfect love.”**

Jesus Christ is the embodiment of love. Jesus Christ is God in the flesh. Jesus Christ is God’s love reaching down to earth to save you and to save me. **Yes, the Bible does tell us that God’s love is the purest love of all.**

End II.

Move III.

But the realities of life can make us doubt God's love. Just because God loves us, that doesn't mean that life won't have any heartache or pain. **Ask any Christian** who's lived very much of life at all, and they'll tell you their heart breaking stories: **stories of illnesses and tragedies, stories of betrayal and broken relationships, stories of sorrow and death.**

66 years ago, on December 1, 1953 a son was born to young mother and father who already had a little girl and boy. **They named their new little baby Philip** and looked forward to bringing him home for the hospital. But Philip just couldn't seem to gain any weight and he was always running a fever. Everyday Philip's mother and father would visit to hold him and try to feed him. And every night after returning home to be with their other two children, they lay in bed praying that God would make little Philip strong. But 18 days after Philip was born, **he died.** Philips' parents were **heart broken.** Death snatched their precious bundle of joy from their arms. **How could a loving God let Philip die?** Where's God's power, where's God's mercy, where's God's love when they needed it most? The death of a child is enough to make anyone doubt God's love.

Let's consider for a moment Basil Mitchell's *Parable of the Kosovar and the Stranger*. During the war in Kosovo, one night a leader of the Kosovar Liberation Front meets with a Stranger who deeply impresses him. They spend that night together in conversation. The Stranger tells the rebel that he himself is on the Kosovar's side—indeed that he is in command, and urges the members of the Kosovar Liberation Front to have faith in him no matter what happens. The man is utterly convinced of the Stranger's sincerity and undertakes to trust him.

They never meet like that again. **But from time to time**, the leader and his friends see the Stranger helping members of the Kosovar resistance, and the leader is grateful and says to his friends, "**He's on our side.**"

But sometimes the members of the Kosovar Liberation Front see the Stranger in the uniform of the Serbian secret police handing over Kosovars to the occupying Serbian officials. On these occasions the leader's friends murmur against him, but the leader still says, "**He is on our side.**" The leader still believes that, in spite of appearances, the Stranger didn't deceive him. **Sometimes** he asks the Stranger for help and receives it. Then the leader is thankful. But other times the leader asks for help and doesn't receive it. Then the leader says, "**The Stranger knows best.**" After a while, the leader's friends begin doubting what he's told them about the Stranger asking him, "**Well, what would the Stranger have to do for you to admit that you're wrong and that he's not on our side?**" But the leader refuses to answer. **Finally**, the leader's friends begin muttering under their breath, "Well, if that's what the leader means by the Stranger being on our side, **the sooner he goes over to the other side, the better.**"

John tells us that God is love, but our experiences in life raise doubts. We ask, "**If God is love, why did Philip die?**" "**If God is love, why do bad things happen to good people?**" "**If God is love, why is evil still in the world?**" These are perplexing questions that all of us ask at some time in our lives. We want to believe that God is on our side. We want to believe that God does love us. **But the realities of life can and do make us doubt God's love.**

End III.

Move IV.

Yet our faith persuades us to love as God loves. The thought of giving up on God might cross our minds, but the thought doesn't take root. In the face of heartache, in the face of evil, in the face of death, our faith persuades us that God still cares. Not everything in life is fair. **Babies die** shortly after birth. **People are in auto accidents** maiming them for life. **A loved one gets cancer** and dies too soon. **A close friend commits suicide.** **A pandemic disrupts our lives.** These are the realities of life that give us reason to give up on God.

John Locke was a 17th-century British theologian who lived at the onset of the age of enlightenment in Europe. Locke had a brilliant mind and was an expert in logic. In his 1695 book, *“The Reasonableness of Christianity,”* John Locke argued that **“faith isn't contrary to logic.”** But our own experience tells us that while faith may not be contrary to logic, faith isn't always dependent on logic. The realm of faith reaches beyond the realm of human logic. **In Hebrews 11:1 (NRSV)** we read the clearest Biblical definition of faith, **“Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.”** Logic alone can never explain faith. That's because faith isn't so much a construct in our head as it is an insight of our heart.

When bad things happen, when tragedy strikes, **God's Spirit comes** and reassures us of God's love. Faith isn't so much about how we deal with what we do understand as it is with how we deal with what we don't understand. The realities of life **raise questions** that have no answers. **I can't tell you** why Philip died. **I can't tell you** why bad things happen to good people. **I can't tell you** while there's still evil in the world. What I can tell you is that none of those realities cancel God's love—not tragedy, not death, and certainly not an evil pandemic. Whenever our faith encounter periods of doubt, **we need to pray for more faith.** Pray for the faith to carry on even in the face of death.

Philips' death did cause his parents to question their faith. They had such high hopes for their son. But while Philips' death strained their faith, it didn't break it. God gave Philips' parents that peace that passes all human understanding (Philippians 4:7). Exactly one year and four days after Philips' death, Philips' mother **gave birth to another baby boy**. God's love had proved stronger than death. Faith had persevered over doubt. Faith persuaded Philips' parents not to lose hope. **This is Philips' mother** with that next baby boy. Yep, Philip's mother was my mother. That picture was taken just a few months before our mother died five-years ago this week. I am a child of a faith purified through fire. Yes, there will be times in everyone's life when you will doubt that God really is love. **Yet your faith can persuade you to keep right on loving just as God loves.**

End IV.

Conclusion: One of the purest expressions of love in all of creation is the love between a mother and her child. **Yet, as pure as a mother's love is, it's still imperfect.** So as we honor our mothers today, we need to remember that our mothers, just like us, are only human. Our mother's love can't substitute for God's love. **And the Bible tells us God's love is the purest love of all.** God is mighty. God is holy. God is just. But first and foremost, God is love. **But the realities of life can make us to doubt God's love.** "If God is love, why did Philip die?" "If God is love, why do bad things happen to good people?" "If God is love, why is evil still in the world? **Yet our faith persuades us to love as God loves.** Our faith allows us to move beyond unanswered questions and find hope for the future. You too can be a child of a faith purified through the fire. Know for certain today that God is love, the "***Purest Love***" of all.

Closing Prayer: Let's pray. Eternal God, thank for loving us so much as to be willing to die for us. There really is no greater love than your love. **Amen!**

Sending Forth: Today is a day to honor mothers but, more than that, today is a day to worship God. Jesus Christ is God's love reaching down to earth to save us. Go forth basking in God's love—"The *Purest Love*" of all. **And all of God's people said...Amen!**