

# **“Sharing the Love: It’s a revelation!”**

John 20:19-31 & 1 John 3:1-7,11

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Covenant Presbyterian Church, Madison WI

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1 John is the first of the three letters bearing the name of John, creatively titled 1<sup>st</sup> John, 2<sup>nd</sup> John, and 3<sup>rd</sup> John. While it’s not certain where or when they were written, one thing is that is known is that the author of the letter was familiar with the Gospel of John, due to the fact that the language and theology tends to overlap. It appears at times that 1<sup>st</sup> John is a sermon given on the gospel of John. While 1<sup>st</sup> John is a much beloved book despite being so short (It’s only 5 chapters long), the second and third letters are much less often read. Biblical scholar C. Clifton Black said that “third John appears to have been carried into scriptural recognition on the coattails of second John, just as the popularity of the second epistle derived from the church’s recognition of the 1<sup>st</sup>. It’s the law of diminishing returns, but in Bible form. I would describe first John as the first Matrix movie, while the second and third letters of John are similar to the second and third Matrix movies. Sure, they exist and are readable and have some good parts, but boy that first one was really awesome. John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist faith, said, “How plain, how full, and how deep a compendium of genuine Christianity!” This was in reference to 1<sup>st</sup> John, not the 1<sup>st</sup> Matrix movie, which had yet to come out when John Wesley was alive. For the next few weeks we will be reading from 1<sup>st</sup> John, in a sermon series called “sharing the love.” Today’s reading from 1<sup>st</sup> John comes from its third chapter.

1 See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are. The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him. 2 Beloved, we are God’s children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is. 3 And all who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure.

4 Everyone who commits sin is guilty of lawlessness; sin is lawlessness.  
5 You know that he was revealed to take away sins, and in him there is no sin. 6 No one who abides in him sins; no one who sins has either seen him or known him. 7 Little children, let no one deceive you. Everyone who does what is right is righteous, just as he is righteous. 11 For this is the message you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another.

I'll come back to this reading, but first I'd really like to talk about Thomas. If you've heard of Thomas, you have likely heard him described as "Doubting Thomas". A bit of an ignominious nickname if you ask me. Of all of the twelve disciples, he is the one who has that negative nickname. Judas doesn't have that well known of a nickname, and he was the one who betrayed Jesus! James and John have a collective nickname, the sons of thunder. That's a cool nickname. That sounds like a metal band. The Sons of Thunder. It sounds like two goons on a hockey team. It sounds like a WWE tag team. But Thomas ends up with the nickname "Doubting Thomas", which is pretty reductive, if you ask me.

Let's look at the story of Doubting Thomas. A week after Jesus was resurrected all of the disciples were behind a locked door together. All of a sudden Jesus came in through the locked doors and appeared to the disciples. He asked Thomas to touch the places where the nails and spear pierced him. He told Thomas "do not doubt, but believe". What happened next was the clearest declaration of who Jesus is in all of the Gospels. He says "My Lord and my God!". Notice that the text doesn't say that Thomas touched Jesus, notice that Thomas did not reach out and put his fingers in the marks of the nails. Thomas, when confronted with the risen Lord declares immediately that he is God. So why isn't he called "worshipful Thomas"?

Nicknames aside, let's try to dig in to what's happening around Thomas at this time. This story came a week after the resurrection. Rewinding to the first Easter Sunday we read that the disciples, having been told by Mary Magdalene that Jesus was resurrected from the dead, decided that this is the best time to hide in fear. They locked themselves in a house because they were afraid of the religious authorities. And then Jesus showed up. Somehow, through the locked door, Jesus appeared before all of the disciples and the disciples rejoiced. Sounds familiar, right? Sounds like the exact circumstances in which

we found Thomas. But Thomas wasn't there that first day, he only had the word of his friends, which he doubted. Just like the disciples had the word of their friend, Mary, which they doubted. Here's the thing, I get why Thomas would have a hard time believing this. Just like I understand the disciples having a hard time believing Mary. They had just seen their friend murdered by the government, and were worried that the same thing would happen to them. Stories of resurrection, while hopeful, probably didn't seem all that likely. But then Jesus appeared to them. Jesus showed up and put their doubts to rest. Jesus said "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." They were sent into the world with the gift of the Holy Spirit given to them by the resurrected Jesus. So where do they find themselves the next week? If you guessed sent out into the world proclaiming the resurrection, you'd be wrong. They're back behind locked doors, this time with their friend Thomas. So really, who is it that doubts here? Is it Thomas, who has heard rumors, or is it the disciples, who have actually seen Jesus and are still hiding out?

1<sup>st</sup> John reassures us "we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is." The disciples, on that Easter morning did not know what was going on. They heard rumors, but who could believe such fanciful things? But God broke in and revealed God's very self in the flesh. Jesus, seeing their unbelief, entered through a locked door and gave them the gift of the Holy Spirit. Then, when it becomes clear that once wasn't enough, God broke in again. "when he is revealed, we will be like him". That is one of the greatest characteristics of God. The pursuit of God's people runs through the history of God's people. God is continuously finding ways to break into the world and demonstrate love to God's people. Think of God's covenant with Abraham. Think of God's deliverance of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. Think of God sending prophets to warn and guide the people of Israel. An essential characteristic of God is that God is in pursuit of the people. This is exemplified in Jesus' life – in his calling people to follow him, in his healing the sick and pursuing relationships with the outcast, and in this persistent appearance to his disciples after the resurrection. Though God continually seeks us and reveals himself to us, it is not yet revealed who or what God truly is. As Paul says in his letter to the Corinthians, "For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will

know fully, even as I have been fully known.” This revelation came in part in the resurrection that we remembered last Sunday, but even those who witnessed the risen Christ directly did not see in full what God was doing in their midst. Paul and the author of 1 John grew in their understanding of what Christ meant to them, but they both acknowledge that the best way to start learning who Christ is, is to admit that we will never fully understand who Christ was and is.

But God continues to reveal God's self to us. What does that revelation look like? What shape does it take? For the disciples, it was the revelation of the risen Lord, the bodily resurrection after Jesus died on the cross. For the authors of the Bible, the revelation came with the gift of the Holy Spirit and in the formation of the Christian community. For us, God's revelation comes in the gift of scripture, it comes in the story passed down to us from generations prior, from mentors, from loved ones who impart their faith to us. It comes to us through experiences of the divine in communion with one another, or in recognition of the great creation that God gave to us. Most of all, through all things, the truth of who God is reveals itself through love. 1 John says, “For this is the message you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another.” If we are to let ourselves be animated by the Spirit of God, if we are to hope to express who God is, to work toward revealing Jesus' light, we must exude love. If we are to work to show God's character, that is a requirement. 1 John says, “See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are.” Because God loved us, we are called children of God. We are formed in our very core through this love of God, adopted into God's family because of God's great love for us. So, we, who are formed by love, formed by a God who is love, show who God is when we go out and love. This call to love others can seem so basic, but in practice is incredibly difficult.

1 John also says, “The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him.” 50 years ago, almost to the day, we were given a trenchant and heinous reminder of how the world refuses to recognize transcendent love. 50 years ago, almost to the day the Reverend Doctor Martin Luther King Jr was shot and killed, martyred for the cause of righteousness. Martyred because he exuded the kind of love that changed the world and frightened those in power. It's easy to point to an assassin's bullet and say that that was

what killed MLK, but the truth of it was the bullet was the result of what happens when people are afraid of the transforming power of love. Nowadays we lionize and valorize King for what he did, we take as fact that he represents the best of American ideals and his values and greatness are part of our country's fabric. But that elides the fact that when he was alive, there was a refusal among many to acknowledge his love as righteous and just. According to a Gallup poll 95% of Americans hold a positive view of Martin Luther King. In 1966, two years prior to his assassination, only 33% of Americans held an overall favorable view of him, with 63% of Americans viewing him unfavorably. The fact that he is so universally beloved now speaks, in part, to our habit of sanitizing legacies, to the point where King has in popular imagination become all things to all people. It speaks to our forgetfulness of the controversial and prophetic stand he took against war and the dangers of capitalism. It speaks to our forgetfulness of the admonition to be patient and wait, rather than break the law to effect change. But this change in our perspectives on Martin Luther King also speaks to his ability to love beyond reason and how his love revealed God's purpose and intention for God's creation. In a Lenten sermon from 1961 King said of love "we must love our enemies because love has within its very power transforming qualities. And we notice hate and think about it. Hate serves to destroy. Love serves to build up. Hate seeks destructive ends. Love seeks constructive ends. Hate seeks to annihilate. Love seeks to convert. Hate seeks to live in monologue. Love seeks to live in dialogue." He concludes "And it is only through love that we are able to redeem and transform the enemy neighbor". This redeeming and transforming love reveals God. It reveals God's purpose for us. It eventually assuages doubts and fears. It brings the disciples to leave their locked doors. It brings Thomas to declare "My Lord and my God!". It brings us to transform the world. God is revealed through love. God's kingdom is revealed through love. Through love, all good things come to light.

King continues his sermon by saying "this is the meaning of the cross... It is not just a meaningless drama taking place on the stage of history, but it is a telescope through which we look out into the long vista of eternity and see the love of God breaking forth into time. It is an eternal reminder to a power drunk generation, a generation growing in nuclear and atomic weapons, saying love is the only way. Love is the only answer. And so, this morning, as I

look into your eyes, as I lift my eyes beyond you and look into the eyes of the peoples of the world, I love you. I would rather die than hate you”

Dr. King did die rather than hate. I pray that we can be as bold as Thomas in declaring Jesus God, and I pray that we can be as bold as King in revealing God’s eternal love.