

**1 John 2:3-11**

**Psalm 1**

**John 17:6-19**

**Love, love, love**

---

*In a sentence:*

Love creates community from a centre, not from a border

If you've taken the time to read through 1 John, you'll have noticed that it is not a straightforward text. There are circular arguments, contradictions and leaps of logic which make it difficult to follow. We've noted already that this is in part because we read here only one side of a conversation. It's also the case that John simply thinks differently from us. Some scholars even wonder whether the text as we have it is in fact a pastiche of materials from different sources, loosely stitched together into our present 'letter'.

Whatever the case, the text is complex, and this is certainly the case in our reading today. There is not a lot of point trying to unpack that complexity here; it is pretty clear, in the context of the rest of the letter, that John's concern here is the operation of love within his community: the 'old' and 'new' commandments are the same: *love one another*.

This much is straightforward. Or it is, until we give it half a thought. *Why* does John insist on this? Again, the answer seems obvious: love is surely a good thing. But let us notice then where the word generally operates for us and, more interestingly, where it doesn't.

In common usage, 'love' pops up almost exclusively in relation to relatively intimate relationships: I love you, she loves him, they love each other. This describes or expresses marriages, families, friendships. To put it grammatically, this is love in the 'indicative'. It's love which is already there.

But let's then notice how love tends *not* to appear in common use: love rarely pops up in what is labelled grammatically as the 'imperative.' That is, love rarely pops up as a *command*. Our politicians do not tell us to love one another. Teachers do not tell their students to love one another. Doctors are not told to love their patients. So much the better if we do but the imperative is rarely spoken. We could say, broadly, that love is not a 'political' category: we recognise its operation *within* the *polis* (the community; Greek for 'city'), but it does not *make* the *polis*, the political space.

The word is absent from public space in this way in part because of the connotations it has in more intimate use. But possible replacement words are largely absent as well. We might occasionally be encouraged as a community to care for each other (usually after some catastrophe) but it is occasional – a passing thing and not something we constantly hear.

John, however, will not keep quiet about love. The love of which he speaks is very much a political, social love: love the other as brother or sister. He blurs the easy intimacy of family relationships into a broader social imperative, command.

And the word command is important, with the corresponding expectation of an obedient response. Intimate love makes a response but it is largely an involuntary one. We ‘fall’ into this kind love. The love which John emphasises here involves not a fall but a *push*, a command: *love* one another.

Yet, even if this is the case, why does it matter? Why should we hear this command and why, then, is it not regularly heard outside walls like these ones? We don’t hear a command to love in the broader community because love does not *define* community for us – something else does. At the political level, for example, the community is defined by such things as national identity and the tangible and intangible borders that come with this. *Within* this identity love may well be present and active, but it is not necessary for political dialogue to take place, for the *polis* to exist. Our politicians and teachers and shock jocks don’t talk about the need to love one another because such talk is redundant. We are a community by a means other than love, and – as much as love ‘helps’ – all that we then *need* to do is legislate for tolerance, or provide enough places for haters or the hated to hide themselves from each other.

This is what John contradicts. His position is that we are first and foremost *lovers* and that society is first and foremost *communion* – love in its broader political dimension. The to and fro of love – in whatever form – is where we begin and end. All other definitions of who we are – or accounts of *how* we come to be – are secondary. A flag is but a fig leaf snatched up and wrapped around ourselves at our discomfort at being naked. It is a uniform which makes us bearable to each other without requiring that, in fact, we bear each other.

In John’s own context he speaks against a definition of self which has nothing to do with national identity but with a different sense of who God is and how God can and can’t relate to the world. The principle, however, is the same. That different idea about the source of our self was enough for a split to occur in the community, to create the kind of divisions which borders or race or gender or religion create.

Against all other definitions of who and how we are, the command to love says that it starts *here*. Who we are has to do with how we relate to each other in immediate relationships.

More than this, the command to love is given because being our true selves depends on it. We heard as much at the very beginning of the letter, where John accounts for the letter itself: ‘We are writing these things so that our joy may be complete’ (1.4). The community of love needs to be loved and to love in return, if it is to be ‘complete’.

So John says, love – *do* it. Shake the hand, ask the question, make the phone call, offer the assistance, give the money, make the time – pass the peace, for peace is what love brings.

The people of light *do* the light, that they may see more clearly, and that all others might too.

Let us, then, love one another.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

*In confessional response:*

*We offer thanks and praise, O God,  
because you have created and sustained us  
and all things.*

*And yet, merciful God, we confess that we have sinned in thought, word and deed.*

*Forgive us when we reserve  
love for the lovely  
for the familiar and comfortable.*

*Forgive us the secondary things we make primary,  
the penultimate things we make ultimate,  
as we choose whom and how to love.*

*Forgive us our insensitivity to our own need for love  
and our assumption that our love  
would not be needed by others.*

*Almighty God,  
to whom all hearts are open,  
all loves known,  
and from whom no secrets are hidden:  
cleanse the thoughts of our hearts  
by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit,  
that we may perfectly love you,  
and worthily magnify your holy name;  
through Christ our Lord.*

*Amen.*

\*\*\*