

ADDRESS	18 April 2021	Third Sunday of Easter
Acts 3.13-20	Faith makes us strong	<i>Open our minds, O Lord, to hear and to understand your Word, and open our hearts to do your will. We ask in Jesus' name. AMEN.</i>
Psalms 4	The Lord hears when I call	
1 John 2.15–17, 3.1-6	Worthy and unworthy love	
Luke 24. 36b-48	Jesus revealed at Emmaus	

Once upon a time, more than 40 years ago, there was a poor painter in New Delhi named Pradyumna. He was studying at the College of Art in New Delhi when a Swedish backpacker named Charlotte dropped in at the college. The two met and fell in love, despite the huge differences of language and culture. But Charlotte's family, and her career as a promising young lawyer, called her back to Sweden at the end of her gap year.

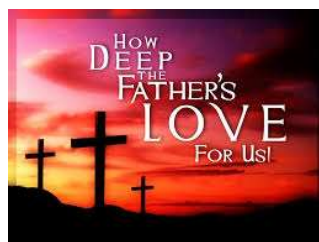
Pradyumna was desolate. He knew he could not live without her. He began to sell small paintings to tourists, trying to save the money for a plane ticket to Sweden. The months went by, but he still had not saved enough. Charlotte wanted to help, but she was still a student and had no money to spare. So Pradyumna bought a bicycle and began to ride to Sweden.

He rode through northern India, and then through Pakistan, risking death from Pakistanis who hated all Indians; he rode through Afghanistan, risking death from the Taliban; he rode through Iran and Turkey and Bulgaria and Yugoslavia, and Austria and Germany and Denmark, risking death from hunger and exhaustion and violent storms and human violence; surviving by begging and by doing lightning sketches of tourists for a few dollars a time.

After more than four months, Pradyumna finally reached Stockholm. He and Charlotte were married, and they still live in Sweden, close to their children and grandchildren.

We all rejoice in a story about someone in search of true love. Especially one with a happy ending. But this book is a story of true love in search of us – it's one epic story of God's love, from the garden of creation to the new city come down from heaven, and it envelops many shorter stories, from the history of the Exodus to the parable of the lost sheep to the accounts of Jesus' death and resurrection.

22 years ago, the British songwriter and worship leader Stuart Townend, wrote a new song which tries to capture the immensity of God's love:



How deep the Father's love for us

How vast beyond all measure . . .

The 10 o'clock congregation sings this from time to time. It's a great modern song, but it focusses only on one dimension of what Charles Wesley called God's amazing love, how inexhaustibly deep it is.

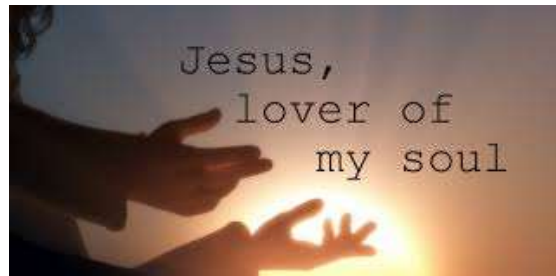
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John tells us that, as well. God's love is different in kind from all others: it is the bearer of God's life and light, it is love that has no hint of possession, love that continues even when it is not reciprocated. John also insists that God's love requires our obedience. His love is not love between equals, as human love is, at its best.

In his gospel, John records Jesus' words at the Last Supper, *If you love me, you will obey my commandments*. Now, in his epistle, John tells us that we cannot love him and the things in the world, at least not in the same way. We can still relish good food and good company, and follow fashion or enjoy sport or some any hobby that does not hurt others. Our love for God is love for the one Eternal, but *the desire of the flesh, the desire of the eyes, the pride in riches*, are longings for the things that will pass away.

When I visit residents in a nursing home, I see how the things they really treasure can now be contained in one room, perhaps in one bedside chest, along with their glasses and their hearing aid and their dentures. Family photographs, their favourite toiletries, sometimes a special painting, perhaps one they have painted themselves. If the room is large enough, their favourite chair. All the other things they once treasured are no longer wanted or needed. The time comes for all of us, when things no longer matter, only people. Ultimately, only God.

The epistles in the New Testament are occasional letters, written to answer questions or resolve issues that had arisen in one or more of the early Christian communities, So, In the second part of today's reading, John reminds us that God's love for us continues after our death, but we don't know what our physical form will be. Or even if we will have a physical form.



One of Charles Wesley's great hymns praises *Jesus, lover of my soul*. But what does my soul look like? In some way, we know we will be like Jesus, so we had better spruce up our souls, purify ourselves, as he is pure.

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In this epistle, John returns again and again to the subject of sin. Sin is disobedience, or, as John puts it in a Jewish context, sin is lawlessness. And the most important law we are called to obey is to love one another, as God loves us.

In the second century Tertullian, the bishop of the great city of Carthage in North Africa, reported that its Christian community, which had once consisted of only a few families, now dominated the city's life – he writes, *we have filled every place among you —cities, islands, fortresses, towns, market-places, the soldiers' camps, tribes, companies, palaces, senate, forum; we have left nothing to you but the temples of your gods.*

And how had they achieved this apparent miracle? Tertullian tells us: *'Look,' they say, 'how the Christians love one another' (for they themselves hate one another); 'and how they are ready to die for each other' (for they themselves are readier to kill each other).*

This is the *koinonia*, the fellowship John writes about earlier. When we love one another, we are reciprocating God's love. We are loving others as he loves us.

In earthly life, there is almost nothing so sad as unrequited love. A few years ago, Marty and I went back to the little Methodist church I grew up in, on the northside, the church where I had been received into the Methodist ministry exactly 50 years before. Over morning tea, we met one of the members of the youth fellowship I had known all those years ago.

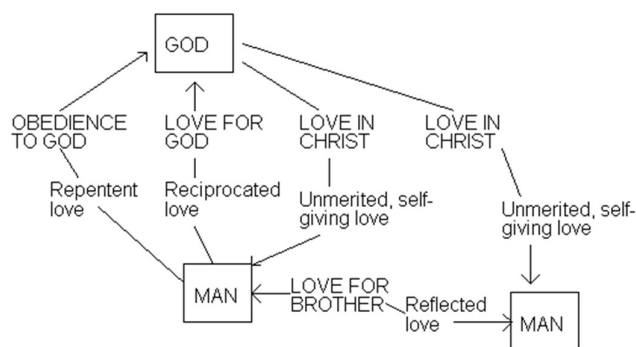
She told us how she had fallen in love with one of the boys in the fellowship. But he saw her just as that freckle-faced kid who was always hanging around. He married another girl from the fellowship, but she never married, because she felt that no-one else could be his equal. She

stayed in the family home, she kept going to the same church, she found a job, but never looked for a career, because, well, what was the point?

God’s love for us, too, is complete only when it is returned. And, as John insists, because God is sinless, when we return his love, we are kept safe from sin. Near the end of our reading, John moves from the present tense to the present continuous tense, to emphasise that he is writing about the always and the now. So, in verse 6 of chapter 3, a closer translation would be *No one who continually abides in him continues to sin.*

We are not perfect, we all sin in thought, word and deed, and in what we have failed to do. We sin against God and against other people, sometimes without realising it. That is why we include an act of confession in every Eucharist, before we partake of the Ultimate Lover’s body and blood.

This is a powerful epistle, Peter will explore more of it in following weeks.



Connections has a rather daunting chart of its content, based on the careful analysis by the great evangelical preacher, the late John Stott. It’s solid theology, but it’s worth studying, and you may gain a lot by reading the whole epistle through in one sitting, to follow the flow of St John’s teaching. This epistle is as relevant today as it was when he wrote it and had copies sent out to the young Christian communities.

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Love not only makes the world go round, it reveals the essence of the living, redeeming God.

