

**ABOVE ALL
1 Peter 4:8**

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Barbara Brown Taylor tells the story of her nephew Will's first birthday party. The little boy was the center of everyone's attention, and so he happily did a little dance – until a jealous 7-year-old named Jason charged over, put both of his hands on Will's chest and shoved. Will fell hard. His rear end hit first, then his head, with a crack.

He looked utterly surprised at first. No one had ever hurt him before, and he did not know what to make of it. Then he opened up his mouth and howled, but not for long. His mother hugged him and helped him to his feet, and the first thing Will did was to totter over to Jason. He knew Jason was at the bottom of this thing, but since such meanness was new to him, he didn't know what to do. So he did what he had always done. He put his arms around Jason and laid his head against that mean little boy's body.

**“What Will did to Jason put an end to the meanness in that room? That is what love is...not a warm feeling between like-minded friends but plain old imitation of Christ, who took all the meanness of the world and ran it through the filter of his own body, repaying evil with good, blame with pardon, death with life. Call it divine reverse psychology. It worked once, and it can work again, whenever God can find someone else willing to give it a try.”
(www.homileticonline.com)**

Eventually, every relationship will need forgiveness.

Today is the fourth Sunday of Advent, the Sunday of Love. We conclude our study in 1 Peter, our Advent study, with our sermon today. Remember, this epistle is written to believers in Asia Minor, what we would call Turkey today, churches facing fierce persecution from the Roman emperor, Nero. Peter has told them that as they share in the sufferings of Christ, to keep on rejoicing, because they will also share in the revelation of His glory (4:12-13). Today, on this Advent Sunday of Love, I want us ponder what the Apostle Peter has to say about love to the believers in these churches facing difficult days.

First of all, he says

I. Love is the mark of authentic followers of Christ. (1:8).

Turn to 1 Peter 1:8. In chapter 1, Peter is reminding his readers that they have a wonderful inheritance. They have been born again to a living hope (v. 3) through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. And their salvation is imperishable, undefiled, will not fade away, and

reserved for them in heaven (v.4). “Keep on rejoicing,” he says (v. 6) despite that the fact that you have various trials. At the end of their faithfulness, even in the midst of hardships – the testing by fire (v.7) – they will give praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ.

Look at verses 8-9. “And though you have not seen Him, you love Him, and though you do not see Him now, but believe in Him, you greatly rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory, obtaining as the outcome of your faith the salvation of your souls.”

Before Peter talks about the love *among* the brothers and sisters in the church, he speaks first of all about our love for God. Here we discover that love is the hallmark of authentic followers of Christ.

Peter describes his hearers as “having not seen the Christ.” Those listening to the reading of this first letter from the Apostle Peter, have not physically seen Christ in the flesh. Probably there is a contrast here between Peter himself, who spent three years side-by-side with the Lord, and his hearers, who have not seen Him at all. Peter is proclaiming their lack of personal contact with the Jesus of history did not place the readers at a spiritual disadvantage, for they had accepted the testimony of those who had seen the crucified and resurrected Christ. They had entered into a personal relationship with Christ, through His Spirit. It reminds us of John 20:29, when the resurrected Jesus said to Thomas, following Thomas’s demand to feel the scars, “Blessed are they who have not seen and yet have believed.”

The listeners’ (the epistle was read aloud in church) love for Christ had been stirred in their hearts through the Holy Spirit.

Likewise, throughout Paul’s epistles, we learn that love for the Lord Jesus Christ is the sure mark of a true Christian. At the end of 1 Corinthians, Paul says, “If anyone does not love the Lord, let him be accursed.” And in Ephesians 6:24, “Grace be with all who love our Lord Jesus Christ with a love incorruptible.”

So, first of all, Peter pens that love is the mark of authentic followers of Christ. Loving the Lord Jesus Christ is the beginning of our follower-ship, the birth of our faith.

II. Love is never the enemy of truth.

Look at 1 Peter 1:21-22.

[Jesus has appeared for] you who through Him are believers in God, who raised Him from the dead and gave Him glory, so that your faith and hope are in God. Since you have in obedience to the truth purified your souls for a sincere love of the brethren, fervently love one another from the heart.

Sometimes in contemporary Christian conflicts, we falsely construct an apparent conflict between loving people and teaching the truth, as if to preach the truth of God’s word is in some way the opposite of love. “Not so,” says the prince of the Apostles. Since you have an obedience to the truth, you’ve purified your souls for a sincere love of the brothers. “Fervently love one another from the heart.”

Love is never the enemy of truth. We don't have to choose between truth and love. We are to preach and speak the truth in love. How many times on contemporary talk shows or in social media musings does someone say, "Yeah. But really isn't the important thing that we love each other?" Yes, it is important that we love each other, but caring love is never in conflict with the truth or the commandments of God. In fact, Jesus says in the Gospel of John, "If you love Me, keep my commandments" (John 14:15). Love and commandment-keeping are not enemies, but, rather, partners in God's plan.

All love is based upon the gospel foundation that Jesus died for our sake, and that God raised Him from the dead – the ultimate demonstration of God's love for us and the source of our love for one another.

The Apostle Peter is saying this: "Seeing that you have purified your souls in obedience to the truth, may there be a genuine love for your brothers. Fervently love each other from the heart." He calls it a "love of the brethren." It's the word from which we get "Philadelphia," city of brotherly love. "*Philadelphia*" was used in secular Greek culture for a mutual love between natural brothers and sisters. It is the sentiment of siblings. But in the New Testament it is always used with affection for those who are spiritual brothers in the faith. He's not saying love them as though they were your brothers; he is saying love them because they are your brothers in Christ.

When 73-year-old Alvin Straight, of Blue River, Wisconsin, learned his 80-year-old brother, John, who lived 240 miles away in Laurens, Iowa, had suffered a stroke, Alvin knew he had to visit him.

Alvin couldn't see well enough to get a driver's license. He bought a 1966 John Deere lawn mower, got a 10-foot trailer to haul gasoline, clothes, food, and camping equipment, and took off.

On his best days, he averaged about 5 miles an hour for about 10 hours a day. When Alvin got within 90 miles of his sick brother's home, he ran out of money and had to camp out for several days while waiting for his Social Security check.

Finally, after 42 days on the road, Alvin made it to within two miles of his brother's house when his mower broke down again. A farmer stopped and helped him push it the rest of the way.

42 days on a riding lawn mower to see your brother?

Now, that's brotherly love. (Jack Gullledge)

The affectionate relationship of believers, of brothers of faith, was the noblest jewel in the crown of early Christianity. It was a sure sign of the new birth. John the Apostle says in his first letter (1 John 3:14), "we know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brethren. He who does not love abides in death."

There is another use of love in 1 Peter. That is in 1 Peter 2:17, where we learn

III. Love is not optional.

We have a series of terse commands in 1 Peter 2:17. Honor all men. Love the brethren. Fear God. Honor the king. But right there in the middle of verse 17 is “love the brotherhood.” This verse is literally translated, “the brotherhood, keep on loving.”

The letters of Peter never use the word “church.” “Brotherly love” represents the church, the body of believers, in his letters. Christian love must be interested in and desire the welfare of the entire body of God’s people. “Love the brothers” is Peter’s language for the people of God, Peter’s language for church.

We can’t limit our affection to those who attract or those who are responsive to our love. We cannot narrow the scope of our love to the few. It’s to love all our brothers and sisters in Christ.

A pastor friend of mine had a leader in his church who, frankly, didn’t care for the new pastor. Wherever this church member traveled, he left a trail of discouraging words about the pastor. This covert campaign against his spiritual leader went on for years. The pastor did not enter into public debate with the deacon, but simply held his tongue. Suddenly, unexpectedly, this member of his flock was diagnosed with cancer. At first, the pastor admitted to me, he rushed to the bedside of the brother who belittled him out of a sense of duty at best and a sense of spite at worst. In fact, when the deacon pulled up to M.D. Anderson Hospital, the pastor was waiting – waiting out of a sense of duty, waiting out of a sense of “I’ll show you.”

“I knew I was supposed to love him, yet I held in my heart some very negative feelings for that man.” But through the next few years, as the pastor faithfully walked, hand-in-hand, with this once censorious man, by the end he was walking heart to heart. “You see,” he said, “by command of Christ, I had to love this man. I couldn’t feel my way into action; I had to act my way into feeling. And acting as if I loved him, I eventually developed a true concern and care.”

Before the man passed away, the pastor had moved on to another congregation. But when it came funeral time, they called my friend and asked him to come back because of the love and care of Christ he had given their husband, their father.

Love is not optional. It is a command. Honor all men. Love your brothers. Fear God. Right there beside “fear God” is “love your brothers.”

There is a fourth thing we see in 1 Peter about love, and that is

IV. Love is the very essence of the church (1 Peter 3:8).

“To sum up, all of you be harmonious, sympathetic, brotherly (there’s our word for love, *philadelphoi*, that brotherly love), kind-hearted, and humble in spirit” (1 Peter 3:8). This is the adjectival form of the noun we discovered in 1 Peter 1:22. Love in 1 John 3:14 and 4:20 is a sign that we have passed from death into life. It is a badge of true Christian discipleship. Calvin himself

said, “Where God is known as Father, there, and only there, brotherhood really exists.” Mutual love was the hallmark of early Christianity. Here, loving is the very essence of the church.

At the memorial service for Hazel Moseley, former staff member at First Baptist Church of Amarillo who was very involved in our International Ministry, Douangmala Madsourivong Le made the following observation:

“My family came to the US in 1979. We didn’t know any English or anything. Hazel was always there for us. She didn’t know our language, and we didn’t know hers, but she was always there. She brought us to the church and taught us the language and, at the same time, taught us about Jesus. Whatever we needed, she was always there. She is an amazing lady. I don’t know anybody else who could take her place. I actually dreamt of her before I heard the news that she had passed away. And I was thinking of her around Thanksgiving and then after Christmas we heard about her. I just felt an emptiness when we heard the news. I just regret that I didn’t know about it earlier so I could attend her funeral.

“I just want to share with you that nothing could stop Hazel – not language, not culture. She was just there for you. She wanted to be there and she cared and she showed it. It was just the love in her eyes and her actions – it comes across. You don’t need the language. You just understand each other because she cared. She really cared.”

Well, there is a final time in 1 Peter where we speak of love, and that is

V. Love embodies God’s grace (1 Peter 4:7-8).

The end of all things is at hand; therefore, be of sound judgment and sober spirit for the purpose of prayer. Above all (there’s our sermon title), keep fervent in your love for one another, because love covers a multitude of sins.

He begins verse 7 by telling us that the end of all things is at hand, anticipating the future. Because Christ is going to return, the church is to be found ready and waiting. Therefore, because Christ could return at any time, be of sound mind. Be reasonable, sensible, prudent. Retain a clear mind. Be self-controlled and balanced in your reactions. Be able to see things in their proper proportion.

Secondly, not only have a sound mind, also have a sober spirit. You might put it this way: “Be clear minded and self-controlled so that you can pray.” Look at verse 7, “Therefore, be of sound judgment and sober spirit for the purpose of prayer.”

And then we come to our text. “Above all.” “Above all,” make sure the duties set forth are of prime importance. Our love should be fervent. It’s the language of stretched out, up to full capacity, maxed out. The term was used to describe a horse at full gallop.

Why? Why be fervent in your love? Because love covers a multitude of sins. It does not mean that love tries to condone sin or hush up sins so that God won’t hear about them. Christian love hides sins not from God’s sight, but from man’s.

I Corinthians 13:6. “Love does not delight in evil.”

Psalm 32:1 says “How blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered.”

Love refuses to deliberately expose the sins it encounters to the gaze of all. It prefers to refrain from and discourage all needless talk about them. It acts to throw a veil over those sins. One writer says, “Only when Christians become mean and ugly do they favor the devil by dragging each other’s failings out into the public and smiting each other in the face.”

Christian love forgives seventy times seven.

Wherever love is, it covers sin by gladly forgiving it. Where there is anger, you will find a defiant person who won’t reconcile and remains full of hatred. On the other hand, a person full of love doesn’t become angry no matter how much someone tries to offend him. He covers all these sins and pretends not to see them. Though he can overlook his neighbor’s sin, he cannot make God overlook it. No one can cover his own sin before God. Only faith can do that. But with our love, we can cover our neighbor’s sin. And just as God covers our sins with his own love, if we believe, so we should also cover our neighbor’s sin. Peter says that we should love one another so that one person can cover the sin of another. Love doesn’t cover just one, two, or three sins, but a whole multitude of sins. (borrowed)

Proverbs 10:12 – “Hatred stirs up strife, but love covers all transgressions.”

When you love someone, you see the best in him. You see the best in her.

Keep your love maxed out, pressing forward. Your love for each other – that love will forgive and cover the sins of your brother.

Bernadine Healy, delivering the commencement address at Vassar College (in 1994), said, “As a physician who has been deeply privileged to share the most profound moments of people’s lives, including their final moments, let me tell you a secret. People facing death don’t think about what degrees they have earned, what positions they have held, or how much wealth they have accumulated. At the end, what really matters is who you loved and who loved you. The circle of love is everything and is a good measure of a past life. It is the gift of greatest worth.”

So what does Peter say about love? “Above all else...” Love above all else.