

## GOD IS LOVE

**Sermon Preached by the Rev. Dr. Lindley G. DeGarmo  
Union Church of Pocantico Hills  
May 2, 2021**

1 John 4:7-21

John 15:1-10

In school, one of the books many of us had to read was *The Odyssey* by the ancient Greek poet Homer. Over the years I have gone back and reread it and even listened to it as a recorded book. What has struck me as I have re-read and listened to *The Odyssey* is how much better, how much nobler, are the human heroes than the gods in this story.

In *The Odyssey* and in the Greek myths, the gods are vindictive, petty. They are deceitful. They play favorites. They make a sport out of interfering in human lives. The goddess Calypso keeps poor Odysseus prisoner on her island, for example, far from Ithaca, from his wife and his son, because she wants him as her own.

Poseidon, the God of the seas, also keeps Odysseus from making it home, inflicting disaster after disaster on him and his men. And while the goddess Athena is Odysseus' champion on Olympus, the gods compete with each other there, using poor Odysseus as a pawn in their power struggles with one another.

It is no wonder that the Greek philosopher Socrates did not encourage his students to read these stories. He thought that the gods in Greek poetry were immoral and unworthy of respect. Like many, he gave the gods their due, probably observed the public rituals, but after that he left the gods alone.

And this view of the ancient gods was fairly common. Wisdom involved offering the appropriate sacrifices, not violating sacred places or harming priests, but above all not drawing attention to yourself. You didn't want to let the gods become too involved with you, because any glory won from the gods would be offset by a greater measure of suffering. Getting involved with the gods was dangerous and to be avoided.

You know, on the face of it, this is a reasonable view of things. Given the fickle nature of glory and of fortune in this life, given our vulnerability to changes in our well-being—be that to our health or our financial status—why would anyone think that the hidden forces operative behind all things—the gods—are anything but fickle? Why would we view the gods as anything but capricious and erratic?

Many still live their lives this way. It's not unusual for people outside the church to come to us asking for baptisms or for weddings or for funerals. They want to "do the right thing" at these important moments in their lives, to offer the appropriate religious respect, but many of them also keep a careful distance. They do not want to get too involved in faith. For some reason, they think it important to get the imprint, perhaps the approval, of God at crucial moments in their lives or in the lives of their children, but they are wary of greater exposure.

They seem to be playing it safe, doing what is expected, following convention—but no more. And in this way, some people today are acting just like the ancient pagans. After all, good, upright pagans were never anti-religious. They accepted the gods as offered by their culture. They paid those gods their due respect—to get a blessing or to ward off harm.

Like the ancient pagans, many today want to have a little religion at important times, but they also resist allowing God any greater claim on their lives. Why? Perhaps they do not see why God deserves any greater commitment. Perhaps they are afraid and wish not to draw attention to themselves by being either too religious or not religious enough. And, perhaps, as is most likely, they just don't see what God has to do with themselves, with their everyday lives.

I am of two minds about such people who approach me for one-off religious ceremonies. On the one hand, I feel like asking them if they don't really want God in their lives, why they bother at all. On the other hand, I think that a baptism, a wedding, or a funeral are occasions when people can discover that the Church is of value and that God is not distant and fickle but rather near, present and constant, that God in Christ does care for our lives and that a relationship with God is not arbitrary and vengeful but gentle, warm and gracious.

Our first lesson this morning, from the First Letter of John, contains the well-known verse, “God is love.” It may be the first verse many of us learned in Sunday school. Christians have become very familiar with this idea—and I think perhaps too familiar with it.

*God is love.* We do not realize what an astounding idea about God this is. To the ancient pagans, this would have been shocking or just absurd. That is why the Apostle Paul described the gospel of Jesus Christ as folly or as foolishness to the Greeks.<sup>1</sup> It, after all, does go against the common experience of life.

Think of how the vast majority of this planet's inhabitants experience life: poverty, infant mortality, recurring famine, fatal epidemic, natural disasters, deadly war. And even in Europe and North America, as so many struggle these days, to claim that God is love goes against so much of our common, human experience.

Nevertheless, as Christians we persist. We proclaim that God's love transcends and pervades common human experience. Sometimes we proclaim this too glibly. Sometimes we sentimentalize this love. Perhaps we forget, when things are going well for us, that this is not the case for everyone. We forget that God's love is not obvious to everybody.

To proclaim that “God is love” is counter-intuitive in a world where evil exists and the Kingdom of Heaven has not yet come. To believe that God is love is to commit ourselves to a counter-cultural, even radical worldview. And it's risky, too, because if that commitment is wrong, then we have dedicated ourselves to escapist fantasy of the highest order, sentimentalist claptrap, the opiate of the masses. It is one or the other. There is no middle ground here. Either we are bearers of a new truth about God and the world, or we are above all to be pitied as the greatest of fools.

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Corinthians 1:17-25.

That is the way of the Gospel. We are bearers of its message that God is for you, God is with you, God cares for you, and, yes, God loves you. This message should strike us—and does strike pagans both ancient and modern—as a message so good as to border on folly.

Without Jesus Christ, it would be folly. In Christ, God brought divine love to common human experience, not to trick us, not to make sport of us, not even to judge us or condemn us, but to join us, to live fully our common human experience, to be born, to live, to suffer, to die, all out of love—and to rise again to show that nothing, not even death, can extinguish this love. This is our hope, our calling, and our mission.

But, those pagans, both ancient and modern, do get something right about faith after all: to get involved with God makes a claim on your life. Perhaps they understand this better than many of us in the Church do. To get involved with God makes us vulnerable to God, not because God is vindictive, but because we must open ourselves up to love and be loved.

Our lesson reads, “Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love.”

Our mission as Christians is to lift up love, as the hidden key to life, now revealed in Jesus Christ—to see all love as an echo of the love of God, to name all love as God’s, and to be drawn to this love and to reflect it for the world.

For to say “God is love” is not sentimental, not easy, not frivolous. It is a bold confession, even bordering on folly. And it demands a bold commitment and faith. How will anyone believe this faith unless they see it among us? How will anyone be convinced that beneath the pain and suffering of common experience flows divine love—how will anyone know unless we live that way?

Having been loved by God, we likewise must love, and not just those closest to us or those who are easiest to love; our love must extend to places and to people where love is foreign, where love is absent, where faith in love has faded or died. To be loved by God is to be given a mission: to take this bold faith to those who just cannot accept it, to the destitute, the broken, to those who have lost hope, and not to tell them this improbable truth, but to show them it *is* true, through our lives and actions. No one will believe it unless they see it in us.

And friends: we are not on our own. In the fifteenth chapter of John’s gospel, Jesus says, “I am the vine, you are the branches. . . . Abide in me as I abide in you,” and then this: “Apart from me you can do nothing.” The Presbyterian *Book of Common Worship* even suggests that during communion we say those words to one another as we are serving the bread and the cup: “I am the vine, you are the branches; apart from me you can do nothing at all.” And I always want to say, “Come on now. Nothing? I can’t do anything without you, Jesus? Surely you don’t mean that.”

Well, in my better moments, I conclude that he does mean that. That apart from his connecting you and me to the heart of the universe, the ultimate reality which is the God who is love, you and I really aren’t alive. And I conclude that people who do abide in love and therefore abide in God, whether they name it or not, are really alive. And I conclude, every day of my life, that I can’t do this on my own—in fact don’t come close to loving everyone God wants me to love. So, yes, I need help. I need the vine. I need the

nutrients and energy and power of God's love. I need God's love to empower my own meager love.

And so we come again today to the Lord's table—a reminder of God's great love and the good news of our share in it. A good measure, pressed down, running over. Come and be filled!

All authority and power and dominion to the name that is above all names—Jesus Christ our Lord—now and in the age to come. Amen.