

ENGAGED COMPASSION — God Is Love

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Based on 1 John 4:16-21. Those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.

The story goes, I have been told, that one of our parents was driving their children to school one day, when the radio turned toward the topic of war. A bright eyed inquisitive, somewhat confused youngster of about six or seven asked what was going on. The parent explained, in the best way a parent can, that a long time ago some people had been pushed out of their land because of the way they believed in God and so those people turned around and pushed *other* people out of a *different* land because of *their* belief in God and now *those* people are fighting back *also* because of their belief in God, and it is all a big mess. In some ways the mess is as old as the Bible and in some ways the mess is really new, and the new mess is really bad and a lot of people are getting hurt.

All of this in the car on the way to first grade.

The bright eyed, inquisitive, somewhat confused youngster of about six or seven responded in the way that only a bright eyed, inquisitive, somewhat confused youngster can: *If all these people believe in God, don't they know they are supposed to LOVE each other? That's what they teach us in church!*

Yes, dear one, precious, beloved child of God, yes child like whom we all must become in order to enter the kin-dom of heaven, they — and we — are all supposed to love each other. That IS what we teach in church.

We just do not always practice what we preach, do we?

Whether it is the really big incapacity to love the theoretical sibling dropping American funded bombs on children in Gaza or the comparatively minute incapacity to love the actual sibling who just trampled our last nerve, our love is not yet so mature as our Lesson describes — our Love is not yet so mature as that of a child! — that our fear has been cast out and our unity in the Love of God has been made complete.

We get angry, we get hurt, we get anxious, we react. We see harmful decisions made with our tax dollars and our public policy and we fear for our very democracy. We point the finger and we name-call in response to the finger-pointing and name-calling we deplore in others. We do it in the name of the justice of Jesus — or at least I do — and yet our souls are not without stain. *It's me, it's me, it's me, oh Lord, standing in the need of prayer.*

Even for us, our Lesson insists, we cannot love God, whom we cannot see, if we do not love the person right in

front of us — or on our TV set or our social media feed — whom we can see. None of us may be starting a literal war. But just give us a church committee with a tight budget and too few volunteers, and watch how fast "God Is Love" turns into "SOMEBODY has to say SOMETHing!"

The author of our Lesson today gets it. Yes, the worst lack of love in the name of religious and political nationalism probably belongs to those beyond our particular community. All of the wars, all of the political corruption, all of the demonizing of the most vulnerable in order to fatten the wallets of the most powerful.

It is bad.

But truthfully, as many of you have reminded me these past weeks, it has always been bad, at least for Black and Brown folks. Don't you know your own history, some have said. What's all this pearl clutching about?!

Others have lamented the bad is getting worse. They used to genuinely believe they could do anything and be anything. Now they are calling up their parents and grandparents to learn from them how to live through Jim Crow.

Those lessons of love from Jim Crow are in fact closely aligned with the kind of love our author is pointing to. Take Mamie Mobley, for example, the mother of Emmett Till, who was murdered so gruesomely in a trumped up charge. Mamie Mobley loved her son, the way our author intends. She held a funeral for him with an open casket so all could see the horror that had been inflicted on him. She wept uncontrollably — out of love — in front of television cameras. Then, unbelievably, she said she harbored no bitterness toward the culprits and that if she had to, she *could raise their children as if they were her own, and [she] could have loved them*. THAT is the kind of love our author is talking about. An *unnatural* kind of love. A kind of love that can only come as a gift. Mamie Mobley herself said the love came to her as a *shield*, as a gift, as a lifelong practice of spiritual commitment.

That is the kind of practice our author wants from us.

You are right, our author implies, to shake your head and point your finger and lament the state of the world as it is. The kin-dom of God may be *at hand* in the Way of Jesus, but it has not yet come throughout the entire world in its fullness. We have to *choose* to live in the love of God that is from everlasting to everlasting and the peace that passes understanding. We have to *persevere* in our love for others if we want any kind of hope for tomorrow. We have to keep *celebrating* the love that is always already here for us in the Way of Jesus because that Love will literally save us in the face of true evil, as it did for Mamie Mobley. We have to keep helping *others* know that love through our acts of kindness and advocacy because it turns out we can only keep the Love that is our divine birthright by giving it away.

This is why we practice our spirituality *in community*, our author might say to the *spiritual but not religious* crowd. Yes, religion as a mechanism for control is a huge part of the problem. Our author specifically challenges that kind of religion by re-defining God as a mutual, indwelling relationship, rather than as King or Sovereign or Monarch. *God IS Love*, our author says. *Those who abide in Love abide in God*.

This is radical, egalitarian relationality in God's very being! This is God as Lover and Beloved and the Love that binds it all together! This is boldness in loving solidarity with all who suffer! No more *sinner in the hands of an angry God*, our author insists. No more top-down domination, absolute sovereignty, or violent judgment.

God wants our collective well-being. Period.

This is why, our author implies, we must have *religion-as-spiritual community* rather than *religion as domination*: to practice the kind of love that desires collective well-being (in the name of the God whose being IS Love); to fall short in our practice (because to err is human); to confess our need to mature more deeply in our love (because confession is good for the soul); to reclaim the divine foundation of love for ourselves (we love because God first loves us), and to try again in community (because if not, all hope is lost).

The bright eyed, inquisitive, youngster of six or seven is right. We ARE supposed to love each other. That IS what we teach in church. And that is what we PRACTICE in church.

Breathing in, we receive God's love. Breathing out, we share that love with all ...