

S.t Andrews Lutheran Church, Tallebudgera

28th April 2024 – Fifth Sunday after Easter

1 John 4:7-12

GOD'S LOVE CHANGES US

Love changes things. Think about that for a moment. What do you think about that as a statement? If you begin a romantic relationship, if that relationship becomes deeper and longer lasting it can lead to changes to where you live, what you do, the people you spend time with. If you have children, or grandchildren, come into your life, even though some people might say, 'having kids won't change our life at all', we know that is something we can smile at, because having those people to now love, and show that love to in your care, will change things like how you spend your energy, your time, your money. If you think about it, there is no way that loving someone in your life will not change your life circumstances in some way. On the flip side, sadly when love sometimes ends it can also change those situations and circumstances for us.

On a deeper level, love changes us. Think about that one. Love changes what we see as being important, our priorities, what we value, what we want to spend our time, our energy, our money towards. A very simple example of this is that when our daughter was a teenager she would spend a lot of time every morning putting on makeup. Even when we were camping she would have to do her makeup. When we asked, 'why?', because she was only with her family, she would reply, 'you never know who will see today'. But when she had a child, and now three, that all went quickly out the window. Not only did she not have the time for that, but she also didn't have the desire to do it; the love for those little ones in her life became more important for her so that she now laughs about how she used to see that as being so important. Love changes us. It can make us more accepting, more tolerant, more forgiving. It can change our interests, even our beliefs. And again, on the other side, if a loving relationship ends not having a close relationship with a particular person can change us also.

Love is transforming. Love changes things. Love changes us. This is also the point John is making in our reading here today, but in talking about the ultimate, the source and example of all true love, God's love for His people, John says that God's love changes us. To put it simply, as John here

talks about God's love for us and how that love is now to come out in our lives, he is saying, 'how can you not?' When you know God's love, it comes out in how your love, your actions, your priorities, your beliefs, your attitude, you yourself, are changed. The first two sentences here sum it up so well; 'My dear friends, we must love each other. Love comes from God, and when we love each other, it shows we have been given new life.' (7a) God's love changes us, it can't not do so. To know God's love means that we are now moved, inspired, motivated, to want to show this love in how we respond to and treat one another. It is a common theme in the Bible, isn't it? In the New Testament especially; love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this ... Love is kind, patient, gentle, etc. All teachings about love which have God's love in Jesus as their example, and all saying that the love we receive is now the love we are called to show. God's love changes us.

We know that 'love' is a word which is used and defined in many different ways. Sometimes it has a selfish definition or element to it; what can I get out of this? And, in a way, that's understandable. Selfishness is a part of our sinful human nature. But it's also not wrong that our love sometimes can involve an element of protecting ourselves, and of course we want to gain fulfillment and pleasure from it also.

But that's where God's love, as laid out here and in so many other places in the Bible, is different. This love is totally self-giving. And an example of this is in how God sent His Son Jesus, the One He loves, to come into the world for us, as John writes here; 'God showed his love for us when he sent his only Son into the world to give us life.' (9) God's love is totally selfless; giving everything for the sake of those who are loved. The closest earthly example we have of this love is the love of a parent for a child, but even then, as we know, that love isn't always perfect. And it is because God's love is so perfect and selfless that it is the love which truly transforms us.

When we are in a relationship, we can discover very quickly that love equals forgiveness. As humans none of us are perfect, we know that, and the more we know someone, the more intimate our relationship becomes with them, the more we see not just the good things about them, but also those which aren't so good. No relationship can continue for any length of time if it doesn't involve forgiveness. And again, this is what we have in our relationship with God; because of Jesus we receive

His forgiveness, totally, unconditionally, and absolutely. This is the forgiving love we receive, and this is the forgiving love we are called to show. This is talking about showing God's love to others; if people hurt us in any way for example in romantic love, or in a friendship, or at work, that doesn't mean we have to keep subjecting ourselves to this. We can take steps to protect ourselves, and then we ask God to help us to forgive and move on so we don't get trapped in bitterness and hurt. And yes, forgiveness can be hard for us, sometimes very hard, which is why the only way we can really do it is with God's help and Jesus' example.

To look then at the other parts of this reading: To know God's love is to love others, and in doing this we are showing others what God's love is really all about. God's love changes us, and that comes out as we show the same selfless and forgiving love He freely shows to us. How does this look in our lives then?

Let's start with those who are closest to us, our most intimate relationships; perhaps our spouse or partner, children, parents, siblings, anyone we share a house with or spend a lot of time with. How do we go sharing this love with them? Is it always easy to be selfless, or are we sometimes selfish? Is there anyone in this circle we are struggling to forgive, holding on to a hurt or a grudge which we know is harming our relationship with them and maybe others, but we just can't let it go? Do we need to remember more God's love for us, hand over those parts of these relationships we struggle with, and ask for God's strength and forgiveness for ourselves to help us to reflect His love to the people we are closest to?

How about our Church family, all of our fellow Christians? Love for fellow believers is a part of both what John is talking about here and other teachings like this in the Bible. How do we go with that? It can be hard, can't it; like any family we are made up of all different people. We don't have to all be the same, we don't have to always agree with one another, but in how we speak, how we act, how we treat one another, we are called to do that in love. And forgiving one another is a very important part of that to. A part of the teaching here is that in showing love we are showing people what God's love is all about, but how often do we as Christians act and treat others in ways which makes a mockery of God's love, giving people good reason to call us fake and hypocrites rather than helping them to see God's

transforming love as something they want to know in their lives? If there are relationships with other Christians you are struggling with in showing them God's love, honestly bring them to God and ask for His help and guidance with them.

And then to go out to everyone; friends, colleagues, community members, people in our society, our nation, our world. Have a think about how you go in showing love to them. What does this look like? How can you help them? Are there ways you could be more accepting, and supportive of others? Are there ways you can start to be a part of the difference we need in our society and our world, even in a small way, rather than complaining about how things are? How can you be a part of bringing the change which is needed? God's love changes us, and God uses us, His people, in this world to bring about that change. For each one of us there is a role we can play in this. What roles is He calling you to play?

A quote often attributed to one of the leaders of the early Church, Tertullian, is that people used to say about Christians, 'see how they love one another'. Wouldn't it be great if people could say that about Christians today? As we look at this reading from 1 John, that is the call to us as Christians, to show that witness to God's love. As we look at the selfless and forgiving love of God, we can be thankful for that and all it means to us in our lives. As we think about how we are called to allow this love of God to completely transform us we know that we don't always allow this to happen perfectly, so we thank Him, again, that His love is perfect in this. As those who are loved, we are called to love. To know and live in God's perfect and forgiving love, and to always be seeking to show it out in our lives. Amen.

FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION/REFLECTION

- How has God's love changed your life? For you yourself? In how you treat others?
- Think about the love God shows to us in Jesus. What kind of love is this? How is it different to the love we often see around us?
- Are there any aspects of showing God's love to others which you struggle with in your life: forgiving others, accepting everyone, being selfless? If so, bring these things to God and ask for both His forgiveness and His help in living His love out.

Pray: thank God for the love He shows to us each day. Ask Him to help us to always show this same selfless and forgiving love to others.

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