

# St. Peter Lutheran Church - Modesto, CA

✠ Second Sunday after Pentecost ✠

June 18, 2006

*Sermon by Pastor Johann Caauwe*

## **We love because he first loved us. (1 John 4:19)**

If you don't slow down, you're likely to miss something. Have you ever heard something like that? If you drive too fast you might miss your turn. If you eat too fast you might choke. If you work too fast, you might miss an important detail. If you live your life too fast, you might miss some of its joys and pleasures. So slow down, right? Pace yourself. Stop and smell the roses.

The words of Scripture recorded by St. John in his Gospel account and in his letters are some of the most beautiful in all of Scripture. And many of them, including our epistle for today, are very familiar to us. But we don't want to miss anything, so let's not pass over these words too quickly. Let's slow down. These words are really a lesson on love—God's love and our love. And if we slow down, we'll see that nestled into this lesson are some very key words, key words that open up for us nearly everything we need to know about God's love and ours. Let's slow down, and ponder anew these wonderful words, one at a time: **We love, because he first loved us.**

If you've ever had to proofread something that you've written, you know it's hard to check for errors in something that you wrote yourself or something that you're very familiar with. Part of the problem is that we already know what the words are supposed to say, so we don't always read each individual word. And we're likely to miss something. I've been told one way to avoid that is to proofread backwards. You start at the end and read it backwards. It forces you to slow down and look at each individual word. Let's do that this morning, so we don't miss anything.

**We love because he first loved us.** John writes that God loved him and those to whom he was writing. That's us. He says that God loved us. And I think our first inclination is to say, "Yeah, I know. Of course God loves us. That's what the Bible is all about. That's what Christianity is all about. God loves us." But slow down for a second and let's think about that. Who are these people whom God loved? Are they people who loved God? Are they people who honored, trusted, respected and served God? Are they people who obeyed his commandments and followed his will? Did God love these people because they were so lovable? No. Not at all.

But God loved us. [He loved] you and me, people who were actually born into the world as total enemies of God. We didn't love God and by our actions were not so lovable. So we're talking about sinful people, people who think sinful thoughts and and speak sinful words and do sinful things. That's us.

And so we recognize that "we" shouldn't even be in the same sentence as "God" and "love." But we are, because of another key word: *first*. **God loved us first.** That's the way it had to be, because we weren't about to love him. By nature we weren't about to serve and honor him. But he loved us first. He loved us before, well, before everything. The Bible tells us that in love God chose us before the creation of the world. Before God had even spoken a single "let there be" he loved us. So, that also means he loved you before you were even born. He loved you before you had ever said a prayer or stepped into church. He loved you before you asked him, or sought him or loved him. He loved us first.

And as in eternity, so also in time, God stepped forward and acted first, in love. God first acted in love when he created the world. He created everything that exists, including our own bodies and souls, our eyes, ears, and all our members. And he continues to act in love by preserving his creation, even though the crown of his creation, mankind, rebelled against him and turned away from him. But God still loved us and promised a Savior to remove the curse of sin. God loved us in his Son Jesus Christ, who revealed his Father's love to us in his perfect life and his sacrificial suffering and death. God loved us; he loved you when his Holy Spirit created faith in your heart to believe in his love to you.

When we put these four key words together, *he first loved us*, we learn a very important lesson about love. The word John uses for love here is *agape*, which is the kind of love that finds no basis in its object. There is nothing in us that caused God to love us. But we already knew that, because God loved *us* despite our sin. We already knew that because God loved us *first*. God didn't love us because of our love. No, we love *because* he first loved us.

That leads us to the next key word in this lesson: *because*. When we see God's love in action, his undeserved love for us sinners, it causes something in us. It affects us. God's love is not simply some mysterious force we tap into whenever we feel the need. It's not a topical ointment that treats symptoms on the surface or a bandage that covers minor scrapes. God's love is more like a transplant or transfusion. It's deep. John writes in verse 16, "**God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in him.**" You cannot truly receive the love of God without it affecting you. It changes things. It causes something. *Because* God first loved us, *we love*. God's love for us causes love in us.

Finally, *we love* because he first loved us. John doesn't say, "you must love because God loves." he doesn't even say, "you should love." But he simply writes, "**We love.**" You see that's what we do now, caused entirely by God's love for us, we will continue to show love to – well, John doesn't really say. He simply writes, "We love." Now, certainly we will show love to God for the love he has shown us. Certainly we will respond to God's love with our love for him – primarily by obeying his will in our lives, by listening to his Word and trusting and believing that Word. We love God because he loved us.

But in this section John also makes the important point that you can't really love God without also loving your neighbor. "**If anyone says, 'I love God,' yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen. And he has given us this command: Whoever loves God must also love his brother.**" In effect, he says that the way to show love to God is to show love to your brother.

We respond to the love of God for us by showing love to the people around us. That might be our family or our friends, our coworkers or classmates. Or they might even be our greatest enemies. Jesus himself told his disciples to '**love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.**'

But whether we are showing love directly to God or through our brother, that love is to be a reflection of the love God has for us. In fact, John uses the same word when he is talking about our love as when he talks of God's love for us. That means that sometimes we will love people who seem unlovable. It means sometimes we will love people *first*, before they return the favor.

Today is Father's Day. And so we have on our minds especially the love that fathers show to their families and on this day we have the special opportunity to show love and appreciation for the fathers who have loved us. I guess in a sense, we could say that this is much like the lesson on love in our text for today. On Father's Day we show love to our fathers because they first

loved us. In many ways the love of God is similar to the kind of love a human father has for his children. The Bible often makes that same comparison.

A few years ago country singer George Strait sang a song that said something like that. The song told of a Father telling his son the secret of a father's love. He said that "Daddy's don't just love their children every now and then. It's a love without end. Amen." And the song then says that God has that same love for his children. You could say that that's a pretty good lesson on love.

But you know that sometimes a father's love is not perfect. And sometimes children do not return their father's love to them. It sounds really pretty in the song, but it's not always that way. Sometimes family life is not as loving as it should be and so many of our other human relationships mirror the discord in the home. What then? How can we continue to show the love we ought to show?

Back up, slow down, and learn again a lesson on love. *We love because he first loved us.* Because we are sinful beings we will always need to keep backing up to repent of our sins and turning to God's love for us in Jesus Christ. We need to remember how God loved us first, without any prompting from us. We need to remember that God caused his love for us and that God's love causes love in us. We need to (as John writes) "**know and rely on the love God has for us.**"

How can we do that? One way is what we're doing right now. We gather to worship to be reminded again and again of these key words: *he first loved us.* We come to the Lord's supper to receive in his true body and blood the pledge of our forgiveness, the proof of his love. But if we wish to see Christian love displayed in our families, perhaps we also ought to use these key words in our homes. Perhaps fathers can teach their families this lesson on love through family devotions, which may be as little as a Bible reading and prayer. They can simply remind their families: God first loved us. And where God's love is known and believed, there will be true love—love between father and children, love between husband and wife, love in the family.

So why don't you slow down? Not just today, as you take the day to show appreciation for the fathers in your life. Slow down for a life-long lesson on love. As you spend time with your family, also spend some time with these key words: *We love because he first loved us.* May God's love for you cause love to grow and flourish among you and in you. Amen.