

“Love” by Rev. Andi Fox based on 1 John 3:1-7

Last week my sister and I were going to Tattered Cover bookshop, one of our frequent haunts as people who love to read and have some disposable income. When we walked in, I heard someone reading out loud. I couldn't quite understand the voice, but I realized there was an author giving a reading from a new book. So we quietly browsed. We split up and then ended up back together in the science fiction section which was in a nook across from where the reading was happening. A small group was gathered in chairs absolutely enthralled by a Latina author who had finished her reading and was answering questions. I later learned that this was Jamie Figueroa, and her new book is called *Mother Island: A Daughter Claims Puerto Rico*. It's a memoir about the author reclaiming Puerto Rican culture after growing up in Ohio. The book jacket says: "In *Mother Island*, Figueroa traces her search for identity as shaped by and against a mother who settled into the safety of assimilation." What caught my attention was when the author was asked about her current relationship with her mother. Jamie said that she loves her mother by keeping boundaries with her. She said that keeping boundaries may not look like love to other people who have certain ideas about what mother-daughter relationships "should" look like, but that was the best way for her to love her mother while being true to herself.

The First Letter of John is also concerned about how we love each other. First John was probably written in the same community in which the Gospel of John was written. The author could be the same person or different people both referred to traditionally by the name John. The Gospel of John is traditionally said to have been written by John the Apostle, and the letters of John were written by John the Evangelist or John the Elder. None of these folks are to be confused with John the Seer AKA John of Patmos who wrote Revelation. We have little

historical knowledge about who actually wrote most books of the Bible. All the John names associated with writers are names that came after the texts were written. But because both the letter and the Gospel deal with similar issues, have similar theologies, and use similar vocabulary we think they come out of the same community.

First John was written after the Gospel of John, and it seems like the community is having some trouble. Some people are leaving the community and stirring up issues. We can piece together from First John there has been a split, and the split is theological. It seems that those who left the community rejected the idea that Jesus was fully human. The heresy of Docetism says that Jesus' body was an illusion and that Jesus didn't suffer or die or resurrect. Christian orthodoxy or what is considered the right belief by most Christians is that Jesus was both fully human and fully divine. He suffered. He died. He rose again. The author goes as far as to call those who have left the community "antichrists." They are people acting against—or anti—our understanding of Christ. In the New Testament, there's no rapture or a guy who takes on the title of the Antichrist in order to ruin the world. Sorry. The story is far less dramatic than *Left Behind* but far more human. First John is not actually a letter but probably a sermon to the people who remained reassuring them that God's claim on their lives has not changed. They are God's beloved children who have been transformed by God's love; therefore, they should love one another.

We know we're supposed to love each other. Later in the fourth chapter of first John it says—"God is love" (1 John 4:16) and that "We love because God first loved us" (1 John 4:19). It's also the new commandment that Jesus leaves his disciples with at the Last Supper—"I give

you a new commandment: Love each other. Just as I have loved you, so you also must love each other. This is how everyone will know that you are my disciples, when you love each other” (John 13:34-35). One of the Trinitarian formulas that I don’t use often but think regularly is instead of the Father, the Son, & the Holy Spirit is the Lover, the Beloved, and the Love between them. A well-known hymn says that ‘they will know we are Christians by our love.’ But... that doesn’t tell us how to love, which is a more difficult question.

Many of us grew up being told about God’s love, that God loves us, and that God loves the world. Maybe we even sang songs about it. Last week in Sunday School we did. We sang, “Jesus loves me, this I know.” It is something different to internalize those words. It’s something different to allow the idea that God is love to shape the way we see ourselves, our neighbors, our enemies, and those who we consider “other” in our lives. Do we treat ourselves as if we are deeply beloved? How do we treat others like they are children of God? How do we as mere mortals reflect the deep love of God into the world?

When asking how to love, it may be helpful looking at the entire letter of First John instead of just this passage. Later in the same chapter, the author writes: “Little children, let’s not love with words or speech but with action and truth” (1 John 3:18). The author has some specific ways his community members can love with action and truth. There are at least four in this passage. Children of God have hope in God. Children of God are pure. Children of God don’t sin. Children of God practice righteousness. Oh, good. I’m glad it’s that simple. [It’s not that simple.]

Do you have any idea how much ink has been spilled just trying to figure out those words? Hope. Purity. Sin. Righteousness. I don't know about you, but I'm pretty good at talking about hoping in God. I get a little nervous talking about things like purity, sin, and righteousness. In my experience, those three words, particularly the word 'sin,' have been thrown around by Christians in a lot of non-loving ways. I don't know if author of *Mother Island* Jamie Figueroa has experienced someone telling her that she is not being loving by keeping strict boundaries with her mother, but someone very well may have. I've heard similar things said to others. I also don't know if Ms. Figueroa is a person of any particular faith, but whether or not she is someone may have pulled out the Ten Commandments and said "right here, it says 'honor your father and mother'" and said that she's not honoring her mother. I haven't gotten a chance to read *Mother Island* yet. I did buy the book and am looking forward to reading it during the summer when I have no school reading to do. What I do know from the bit I heard of her talk is that her relationship with her mother is complicated. Maybe before we pass judgment on the decisions she's made, we should at least read her memoir. Maybe that's true for most actions we may think of as not being "righteous" or "pure." Maybe we should listen to people's stories and experiences. Maybe we should give them the loving action of assuming they are not acting in an un-loving way.

I remember when I was a young teenager a recent seminary grad I'll call "Megan" came to our church to be voted on as our new Associate Pastor. As is still custom in many churches, Megan was to preach at Sunday morning worship and then after worship we'd have a congregational meeting to ask her questions and vote on whether or not we want her as our

Associate Pastor. Having gone through that process a couple of times myself, I now have way more sympathy for Megan than I did as a teenager. I don't remember what passage Megan preached on, but I remember she preached on love. God's love. Specifically, God's love for all people. In the break between worship and the congregational meeting, a church member asked me what I thought of Megan's sermon. I, confidently, said that she had picked the easiest topic to preach on. The church member said, "I think that preaching that God loves us is easy. Preaching that God loves 'them' is hard." I asked "why is it hard to love other people? Aren't all people children of God?" Maybe I didn't say that quite that articulately. The church member said "Even if you believe all people are created in God's image, it can still be hard to love people, especially people who aren't like you. People are cruel. People are mean. People act out of hurt. Love can be easy, but it can also be difficult." Maybe he didn't say that quite that articulately, but his meaning has stuck with me.

In some ways it's difficult to love because loving takes place in many different ways. It's very different to love a friend, to love people oppressed in another country, to love God, and to love pizza. I do love pizza! But I don't love pizza like I love God. It's a very different kind of love. Likewise, the community that First John was written in is going to love people within the community and the people who have left the community differently.

How do we love even if we know we are going to love differently? The answer, I think, is: the best we can, knowing that we are flawed people and the people we're trying to love are flawed people. We know that we're not going to love everyone or everything the same way. Sometimes we love best by having boundaries. Sometimes we love best by walking away from a

toxic relationship. Sometimes we love someone best by standing in solidarity with them even if we don't fully understand their experiences. Sometimes we love best by telling them the truth even if it's painful. Sometimes we have to choose to love ourselves.

I know that the letter says "let's not love with words or speech but with action and truth" (1 John 3:18), and I normally hate to contradict the Bible... but we know that words can be incredibly powerful. Words backed by action can tear down communities or build them up. Words like the words in *Mother Island* can help someone claim their ethnic heritage. Words like the words of a church member to a teenager can scatter seeds of faith that bloom only after that teenager has grown up. Words like the words of First John can help people stand firm together in the face of difficulty. God's love is transformative, and God's love will transform the way we love each other. So let's do our best. Amen.