

Luke 4:16–21 (Common English Bible, CEB)

¹⁶ Jesus went to Nazareth, where he had been raised. On the Sabbath he went to the synagogue as he normally did and stood up to read. ¹⁷ The synagogue assistant gave him the scroll from the prophet Isaiah. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

¹⁸ *The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because the Lord has anointed me.
He has sent me to preach good news
to the poor,
to proclaim release to the prisoners
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to liberate the oppressed,
¹⁹ and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.*

²⁰ He rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the synagogue assistant, and sat down. Every eye in the synagogue was fixed on him. ²¹ He began to explain to them, "Today, this scripture has been fulfilled just as you heard it."

Mark 12:28–34 (CEB)

²⁸ One of the legal experts heard their dispute and saw how well Jesus answered them. He came over and asked him, "Which commandment is the most important of all?"

²⁹ Jesus replied, "The most important one is *Israel, listen! Our God is the one Lord,* ³⁰ *and you must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your being, with all your mind, and with all your strength.* ³¹ The second is this, *You will love your neighbor as yourself.* No other commandment is greater than these."

³² The legal expert said to him, "Well said, Teacher. You have truthfully said that God is one and there is no other besides him. ³³ And to love God with all of the heart, a full understanding, and all of one's strength, and to love one's neighbor as oneself is much more important than all kinds of entirely burned offerings and sacrifices."

³⁴ When Jesus saw that he had answered with wisdom, he said to him, "You aren't far from God's kingdom." After that, no one dared to ask him any more questions.

1 John 4:7–12 (CEB)

⁷ Dear friends, let's love each other, because love is from God, and everyone who loves is born from God and knows God. ⁸ The person who doesn't love does not know God, because God is love. ⁹ This is how the love of God is revealed to us: God has sent his only Son into the world so that we can live through him. ¹⁰ This is love: it is not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son as the sacrifice that deals with our sins.

¹¹ Dear friends, if God loved us this way, we also ought to love each other. ¹² No one has ever seen God. If we love each other, God remains in us and his love is made perfect in us.

*Here's an essential question about our knowledge of God:
What do we know about God that we would not know without Jesus?*

If you are a member of St. Andrew, then you are a member of the United Methodist Church. And if you are a Methodist then you are pretty sure to be a Wesleyan. And if you are a Wesleyan, you are most assuredly an Arminian – not Armenian (from that part of Turkey) -- but an Arminian, after a Reformation theologian, Jacob Arminius. For awhile, John Wesley even edited a magazine titled, *The Arminian*. Let me explain.

The Protestant Reformation resulted, in part, from the translation of the Bible into the common languages of Europe and the hard work of Luther, Calvin, Arminius, and many others to wrestle with Scripture and the theology they found there. Needless to say, they didn't all agree on what they found, either with respect to the nature of God, his work in this world, or what God expected of his people. And each generation of the reformers built on and critiqued those who preceded them. Calvin built on Luther and Arminius on Calvin. From all this turmoil rose the major Protestant denominations of today and all the important strands of Protestant theology. The differences among the reformers mattered

and the debates are with us still. Understand, these aren't debates about who really believes the Bible but what it is that we find in the pages of Scripture. Here's an example:

Suppose someone came up to you and asked you to tell her about God, i.e., to describe God to her. Where would you begin? With an adjective? A story perhaps? What words would sum up the essential characteristics of God? What would you most want your friend to know?

Pause before you answer, for you'll find yourself on one path or another. For example, you might begin with the simple and very true statement, "God is great." You would probably soon find yourself talking about God's creation of the cosmos and his control of it. If so, you'd be making a bosom buddy of Calvin and those who attempt to ground their faith in various forms of his theology, such as Presbyterians, most of the Reformed church, many Baptists, and lots of the newer non-denominational churches that have sprung up.

Or you might begin with "God is good" and launch into a discussion of good and evil, morality and ethics.

But if Jesus is the *full* revelation of God (and you are answering these God-questions as a Christian), then how does Jesus' incarnation reveal uniquely to us God's greatness or even his goodness? You probably don't need the baby Jesus to know that God is great or to know that God is good, for there is ample evidence in the Hebrew Scriptures to show both of those statements are true. Further, God's greatness and goodness are themes shared by all the monotheistic religions.

What is it that we Christians have to say about God that is unique and gets to the very essence of God? What is it that we know about God that we could not know without Jesus?

Now, we find ourselves on the turf of Jacob Arminius and John Wesley and those who ground their faith in forms of their theology, such as the United Methodists, the Nazarene, the various Wesleyan denominations, most Pentecostals and more.

God is love

Arminius and Wesley believed that the apostle John takes us to God's essence with the simple statement, "God is love" (1 John 4:8). This is a statement about God that you could never really know without the incarnation, from the crib to the cross. We don't need Jesus to know that God is great or sovereign or all-knowing or all-powerful. But we would never know that God *is* love without Jesus.

Jesus, fully human and fully divine, reveals to us that God is inherently relational, one God existing as three persons, each of whom is fully and completely God though none are all of God. The three, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, are not simply three parts of a whole. Each *is* the whole though not all of it. The truth is that we lack the words to describe what our minds cannot fully comprehend.

We proclaim that there is one God consisting of three persons who have always been, are now, and always shall be a loving community of three, the Trinity. This truth about God makes John's statement, "God is love," not mere sentiment, but a concrete statement of God's being. After all, did John mean that God loves more than anyone? Or that God loves without ceasing? Or perhaps that God loves truly? All this is accurate, but it isn't the same thing as saying that God *is* love. The simple statement "God is love," seems almost nonsensical. Love must have an object. We love something or we love someone. How could any single person, in isolation, *be* love?

However, when we proclaim that God is unity in three persons, then the statement that God *is* love makes perfect sense. God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit have always been, are now, and always will be in loving relationship with one another. God *is* love because God is inherently relational. The loving relationships among the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit form the basis of God's very essence. The three persons of the Godhead¹ live in eternal community, in a loving community of three persons. Indeed, it is

¹ Yet another way to express God's unity-in-threeness. You'll find that people use many words and images in the effort to express the unity and relationality of God. Most of these efforts are helpful, but none are

from God's love that we learn the true meaning of love. As John writes: "We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us – and we ought to lay down our lives for one another" (1 John 3:16). The triune God is both lover and beloved in the One.

This is where John Wesley's personal theology and, hence, United Methodist beliefs begin: "God is love." In the lyrics of Charles Wesley, John's brother: "Love divine all loves excelling, joy of heaven, to earth come down."

Created to love

In the profoundly simple statement, "God is Love," there is a fundamental truth about humankind as well . . . we are created for community. The opening chapters of Genesis tell us that humans are made in God's image. We too are inherently relational; we are made to live in loving relationship with God and one another. It should surprise no one that Jesus reminded the scribe that loving God and neighbor are the two great commandments. We are created to love.

Frankly, it is a mistake to believe that the sole focus of our Christian life is to be our personal relationship with Jesus. Rather, our relationship with Jesus Christ is to be lived out in relationship with others. We are called not to isolation, but to fellowship and communion. We are called to love as God has loved us. And we must always remember that for love to be love, it must be freely given.

We baptize our children into this community of God's people and we are responsible for doing all we can to build it up. Thus, a key test for any congregation, not just St. Andrew, is whether others see community in us. Are we inviting? Are we welcoming? Are we involved in the life of St. Andrew or do we just show up for church an hour each week (or every other week!)? This gets to the very heart of the Gospel and is why our joyful proclamation of a triune, relational God is such Good News to those who feel isolated and alone. It has always been this way among us Christians, at least when we have gotten it right. One of the main reasons Christianity grew in the midst of a pagan world, was that the pagans could see in the Christians a way of living, the Jesus Way, that they wanted for themselves.

"They love one another, and from widows they do not turn away their esteem; and they deliver the orphan from him who treats him harshly. And he, who has, gives to him who has not, without boasting. And when they see a stranger, they take him in to their homes and rejoice over him as a very brother; for they do not call them brethren after the flesh, but brethren after the spirit and in God.

-A letter to emperor Hadrian from a Christian named Aristides

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. In the key scripture passage for this week, John writes that "God is love." Our belief in the Trinity – one God who has always existed in three persons – reveals that God is inherently relational, that God is inherently loving, that God is inherently a loving community of three persons. We, in turn, are created in God's image. What might this say about the nature of the loving relationships we have with others? To put it another way, when we embrace the image of God within ourselves, how does this affect the way we relate to others?
2. In the New Testament, love is not a feeling or even an idea. It is the concrete expression of Jesus' self-sacrificial death on the cross. "We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us – and we ought to lay down our lives for others." (1 John 3:16) We look to Jesus' life to see what love really is. True love for God and neighbor is an expression of our repentance, transformation, discipline, and sacrifice. How can Jesus' example of sacrificial love transform our own notions of what it means to love others? How is your love for others seen in your own concrete actions? How is your love for God seen in your actions? Do we ask enough of ourselves or is our love limited to that for which we can find some extra time and effort in our busy lives?

complete or wholly sufficient. If you think that you've got the mysteries of the Trinity all figured out, you are wrong!

