

Complete Joy: Sharing First Love

I John 4:7-21 (CSB)

⁷ Dear friends, let us love one another, because love is from God, and everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. ⁸ The one who does not love does not know God, because God is love. ⁹ God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his one and only Son into the world so that we might live through him. ¹⁰ Love consists in this: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. ¹¹ Dear friends, if God loved us in this way, we also must love one another. ¹² No one has ever seen God. If we love one another, God remains in us and his love is made complete in us. ¹³ This is how we know that we remain in him and he in us: He has given us of his Spirit. ¹⁴ And we have seen and we testify that the Father has sent his Son as the world's Savior. ¹⁵ Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God—God remains in him and he in God. ¹⁶ And we have come to know and to believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and the one who remains in love remains in God, and God remains in him. ¹⁷ In this, love is made complete with us so that we may have confidence in the day of judgment, because as he is, so also are we in this world. ¹⁸ There is no fear in love; instead, perfect love drives out fear, because fear involves punishment. So the one who fears is not complete in love. ¹⁹ We love because he first loved us. ²⁰ If anyone says, "I love God," and yet hates his brother or sister, he is a liar. For the person who does not love his brother or sister whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen. ²¹ And we have this command from him: The one who loves God must also love his brother and sister.

I don't know how many of you know the story of how I met my wife. It was the beginning of the second semester of her freshman year at Martin Luther College in New Ulm, Minnesota. The halls were flooded with people because chapel had just finished and it was time for the next round of classes. Unknowingly, I ended up walking right behind her in this sea of people when she abruptly stopped dead in her tracks. I walked right into her. She didn't drop her books or anything, but I looked at her and asked, "Are you okay?" There was a brief pause, and then she unashamedly said, "No. I'm lost. I don't know where my classroom is." Being the experienced upper classman, I asked what room she was looking for and then walked her to the door. I didn't really say anything else but hoped that I would run into her again. Here we are some 17 years later, happily married for almost 16 years. It may be cheesy, but that was the beginning of our love story.

You might have your own meet cute story - a blind date, a coworker who noticed you, an introduction from a friend, an online dating site - or not, but I want to share with you a different love story, a story of first love that is actually about all of us. It is God's love story for you, that before you ever existed, he thought of you and chose to love you. He created this world and all that is in it for you. And when Adam and Eve sinned and messed this perfect world up, he told us how his love story for us would play out, that the offspring of the woman would crush the serpent's, Satan's, head, and make us perfect to live with him forever in paradise.

That plan culminated in the gift of himself, the Word made flesh, Jesus Christ, true Man and true God, who lived among us under God's law, keeping it perfectly for us 24-7 every year of his life here on earth. Then, he took all our sins, all our imperfections, on his shoulders. He paid the price for them with his death on the cross. Three days later he rose from the dead, proclaiming that our sins were fully paid for in total without taking any repayment ever – our full atoning sacrifice. "God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his one and only Son into the world so that we might live through him. Love consists in this: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins." (verses 9-10) He is our first love.

Not so much a Rom-Com meet cute, but when I was baptized on May 1, 1983, that was the day I knew God loved me first as he washed me clean of all my sins, made me perfect, adopted me into his family, brought me into fellowship with him, gave me the inheritance of heaven as my eternal home with him. You may have your baptismal date memorized too, but maybe you first learned of God's love for you later on in life when the love of your life - your significant other, your spouse - first told you of God's love story for you. Maybe it was when a random person loved you enough to invite you to come to a building to hear a love story from on high, hearing that this story was about you. Maybe it was online as you were seeking answers and you found a God who loved you first.

You are loved by God first. He loves you like a parent loves a child. Parents, you don't love your children for the potential that they have, that one day they will make you proud. You decided to care for them, serve them, cradle them, clothe them, feed them, comfort them – not for what you would get in return from it, not because they had done something to merit all this service and care, not because they had made an agreement or contract with you to try their best and make you proud. You chose to love because you were loving like Jesus loved you, because you had been loved first by God. This first love changes our lives and creates a response: "We have seen and we testify that the Father has sent his Son as the world's Savior. Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God—God remains in him and he in God." (verses 14-15) Being first loved by God, we share that first love with others.

Some of you probably heard for the first time the beginning of my wife's and my love story today. One reason for that is that I have some fears about sharing that story. Will it come off as egotistical? Self-indulgent? Will people get bored with it? Make fun of this precious memory? Will they feel bad if they don't have a meet cute story of their own?

Is this not the same in sharing the story of the one who loved us first? Am I afraid to share God's first love of me because I won't tell the story right? (Because neither you nor me have the Bible 100% memorized, we are probably going to misremember or misquote something.) Am I afraid that as I share God's love story for me that it will come off as holier-than-thou, like some kind of Bible thumper? (God told us not to be surprised if the world hates us.) Am I afraid of being called a hypocrite, one who doesn't practice what they preach, someone who loves only in word and not in action? I mean, it's scary when John writes: "If anyone says, 'I love God,' and yet hates his brother or sister, he is a liar. For the person who does not love his brother or sister whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen." (verse 20) And so we let slip by the chances to tell the story of our first love.

Thanks be to God that none of our sins, none of the times when we have failed to share God's first love of us, can ever change the fact that he has loved us first. Jesus is still our atoning sacrifice. All our sins are still paid for. We have been purified from all unrighteousness. We have been brought into fellowship with God and with our brothers and sisters in Christ. "In this, love is made complete with us so that we may have confidence in the day of judgment, because as he is, so also are we in this world." (verse 17) We are confident of our standing with God because his first love of us remains and we remain in that love.

What do we do, then, with our fears of sharing this first love? John wrote, "There is no fear in love; instead, perfect love drives out fear, because fear involves punishment. So the one who fears is not complete in love." (verse 18) God loves you first and perfectly. You might be afraid that you don't have all the answers or know all the Bible passages needed to share how God loved you first. You don't need to. To love our brother or sister is to share with them what we know. We know that Jesus took away our sins and purified us. We know that God loved us and them first. Be confident in this truth that you know. When you get asked a question you don't know, take that as an opportunity to love God's Word, to dive back into it, think critically about it, Google Bible passages, talk to your pastor. In this way, you will grow in the love with which God loved you first and grow more confident in sharing it. Besides, it's not up to us to make this person believe; that's God's job. We plant and we water. We share this story of how God loved us first, and God is the one who makes that message take root and grow in their hearts.

You rightfully fear being called a hypocrite because we do not always practice what we preach. Sometimes our love is only words and not actions. So we confess our sins, to God, to the one who calls us out on being a hypocrite, and we are assured from God himself that we are forgiven. Being renewed, we try again to love like Jesus in word and action. "We love because he first loved us." (verse 19) You might be afraid of being rejected, hated, laughed at as you tell this love story. That might happen. But if we are not willing to share this love story, how will this person ever hear it?

So, it's time to introduce people to our and their first love. One way that we share God's love story of us is through our actions. "No one has ever seen God. If we love one another, God remains in us and his love is made complete in us." (verse 12) Do our actions speak the story of God's first love of us? Do we love our spouse, our kids, like Jesus – taking the unprompted first action and serving them without expecting anything in return? Do we do the dishes without being asked? The laundry? The vacuuming? The lawnmowing? Do we give the unasked hug? Do we make time to sit and talk and actively listen to the other person? Do we offer help to our neighbors, to help with a project at their house or a project here at church? Do we lend our muscles to help someone move? Our actions tell a story. As one of our people has said multiple times, "You might be the only Bible anyone ever reads."

The other and maybe more obvious way to share God's love story of us is to tell it. This might be going out on a limb and going door to door with the Truth in Love Ministry missionaries in the middle of June, knocking on random people's door to tell them God's love story, your first love. It might be sharing a post on Facebook or talking about this sermon as you're sitting around playing cards or when you're gaming online with friends. It might be keeping a picture of your baptism in a place where people can see it.

One specific way that you might tell others of God's love story with words and actions is purposefully and committedly being here around God's Word. When family and friends come in from out of town, I often hear people say that their visit is why they didn't come to church. What would it say to your family and friends if you let them know before they visited that you will be going to church on Sunday because you need to hear God's love story for you and that this love story is for them as well? Even if they blow you off and sleep in or get mad at you that you won't give them extra time one on one, it would tell them how important God's love story is for you. I love it when I see you bringing your family and friends to worship with you, sharing that first love so that even more people are getting to hear it and experience it for themselves. It makes our joy complete to join together in God's love story.

We all have the same first love story, that God loved us first. That love story will never go away. It drives out all doubt of what will happen to us on judgment day because we know that God prompted by his love for us is the atoning sacrifice for all our sins. Share this first love. This is how we know God lives in us and we in God. Sharing God's first love story goes to make our joy complete. Amen.