

Grace and Peace be to you from God our Father and Jesus Christ our Lord.

Over the course of our Advent midweek series, we examined the truth of our bodies in light of the incarnation of Jesus. God made us body and soul in His own image, that image being Jesus Christ our Lord, God's Son in human flesh. God made us spiritual bodies, receiving life from Him and bearing His fruit in our bodies. God made us spousal bodies, created for a one-flesh union with Jesus and fellowship with one another. God made us living bodies, not meant to be discarded by death but to dwell with God in eternity. We concluded our series by considering this identity that God has given us through our bodies. We are not nobody, nor are we anybody. We are, in fact, we are somebody. And through our identity, through our body, God gives us a home, a place where we belong with the people who share in our flesh.

It is Christmas that tells us where that home is. It is Christmas that tells us where we belong. "Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call His name Immanuel, which means God with us." God *with* us. Do you understand the weight of those words? Yes, we know of Christmas as angels and shepherds and managers, but how often do we come to peer into the face of that precious child and consider what His birth means? It is that very child that enables John to address us as he does in his epistle, "Beloved."

That is who you are, whom you have become in light of Christ's incarnation. That is your identity wrapped up in a single adjective, a single word, on account of Him. Beloved. This word, beloved, reveals in the first place that God has created this identity for you. This is not an identity you have created or claimed for yourself; it is not a self-identity. This word, beloved, involves an agent, an actor. If I'm beloved, it means that someone else is doing the loving. And John is proclaiming this love over you, over me, over everyone.

But who is the actor? Where is this love coming from? John says, "love is from God." He is the source, the doer, the lover. God loves the world. He loves you. That's pretty good. But it gets better. God's love toward you is not a feeling. It's not internal. It's not hidden. God's love appears, John says. It is manifest. You don't have to wonder or guess about your identity as His beloved. This love becomes evident. You know that you are beloved because of something that happened, John says. Something that happened among us, right here in our midst, right here in our flesh and blood world. God sent His one and only, His unique son, for a purpose: that through Him we might live.

Well, it just keeps getting better. How strong is this love of God? Well, apparently, the people whom God has loved through this sending of the son were, apart from that sending, dead. Because we don't live except through Him, through Jesus. And so God even loves people who were dead, who couldn't respond, who were not aware of Him, and who offered Him nothing. God loved dead people into life. It gets even better.

The Apostle writes, this is love, not that we loved God. Your love is not the focus. Your love is not the source of your identity. No, this is love, that God loved us and sent His son to be the propitiation for our sins. God's love is so strong that He didn't only love dead people into life; He loved his enemies. He loved people who deserved His wrath. And God turned aside His own wrath by turning it toward the cross, toward Jesus. Jesus has propitiated God; turned aside God's holy wrath by taking it into His own body. This is what He did. This is who He is. The propitiation for our sins. And that makes you and me His beloved. This is whom we are, freely given. This we believe, we confess, and in this, we rejoice.

But John doesn't stop there. No, identities are not passive things. They are not simply descriptions of who we are but identities that define how we live. And as God's beloved, we are to live out our lives among those who also are the beloved of God. "Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another." It's like the flow of clear life-giving water from its source to its destination. God has loved me. His love flows into me, and that love flows through me and out to you. And that love is not a feeling. It's

not internal. It's not hidden. God's love appears, John says. It is manifest. Where? John says, "If we love one another, God abides in us and His love is perfected in us." It is manifested in you and me.

Now we come to the problem. Now we come to the denial of God's word. Now we find ourselves running away from our identity. Because the flow gets interrupted, doesn't it? Something comes and clogs the line because love doesn't always flow that well among us, does it? In our church, in our community. And that's a problem. As John says, "Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love." If God's love does not flow through us, then we are not benefiting from God's forgiving love. Why? Because if we do not love one another, then we deny that we ourselves are loved. We reject the identity God has given us through His Son. We reject that we are His beloved and belong to Him. We deny God Himself. That's a problem that must be dealt with.

Have you ever had the occasion to unclog a sink? You take out that trap underneath the sink where stuff accumulates, not really knowing what's there, but it's just this stuff that builds up to block the flow. And when you go to remove that clog, what you find is a massive filth that is almost unspeakable. Even if you're very careful, you need to wash your hands thoroughly after taking it out. And if it's big enough, you need to wash your pants and shirt and your shoes as well. Beloved, there are lots of things that can clog the flow of love. Lots of different kinds of filth that deny who we are and restrict the love of God from flowing through us.

Our gossiping words that murder. Our wandering eyes that commit adultery. Our groping hands that take what belongs to others. Our perverted justice that condemns unrighteously. Our misplaced anger that we do not direct at sin, especially our own, but toward others for whom Christ also came and died. Our wandering hearts and minds and hands that would rather starve out in the cold than be warm and fed at home with the Father, simply because we do not want to honor His will. Our filth grows and clogs the love that He gives. And we let it. Who do we think we are? Good question.

Who *do* we think we are? Good question. There's the key. There's the freedom. So please, beloved, do not be afraid right now. Right now, God is turning me and you away from our filth. He is unclogging you from the filth. That is why Jesus came. He came as an expert plumber, getting Himself dirty by unclogging our filth and washing us clean so that His love may flow through us once more. So don't be afraid. Turn away from the filth and hear the word of your identity: Beloved. God calls you beloved.

In that identity, there is freedom. There is the freedom to call sin sin, because we will not be destroyed when our sin is exposed. We will not be destroyed. God sent his son as the propitiation for your sins. Beloved, in that identity, there is the freedom to repent. And there is freedom to live and to begin anew. Because you are, in fact, His beloved. He sent His Son for you. And He will always take us back. He is the one who has made us His beloved to begin with. 1 John 3, "See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called the children of God; and so we are. Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when He appears we shall be like Him, because we will see Him as He is. And everyone who thus hopes in Him purifies himself as He is pure."

One day, Jesus will come again, and our identity will be made complete and evident to us all. We will love Him. We will love one another exactly as He has loved us. But until then, you remain His beloved. And by the power of that identity, we can love one another. By the power of His love in Christ, we can repent from our filth and let that clear, life-giving water flow through us. As the Father sent the Son to love the world, so He sends us to love one another. It's not so hard. It's an identity thing. Beloved, let us love one another. Amen.