1 John 4:18 February 10, 2019

**Perfect Love**

How many of you know someone, maybe even a Christian, who is afraid of God’s judgment? ….Maybe fearful of being damned to hell, or at least, in more cases….unsure of their salvation? [not a question to wait for an answer on…pause but don’t look for hands] I do. As a pastor…I’ve dealt with this. I can’t tell you the number of Presbyterians who are afraid they have not been saved. Unsure…that God will allow them into heaven. (I’ve not really come across that circumstance yet here…but …it happens.)

 When I first entered the pastorate I kind of presumed I would spend much of my ministry pointing out the error of believers’ ways. I thought, *mistakenly it turns ou*t, that most often…in counseling…I would be dealing with arrogance and cockiness….dangerous self-pride…which led people not just into temptation…but outside the narrow gate of being “*good*”.

~ It turns out…reality is just the opposite. Church goers, believers….more often are concerned….they have not been forgiven. Maybe not been good enough…to make it into the perfection of heaven.

 I have spent much – more - time – showing people, convincing honest, sincere, contrite hearted Christians…that God has forgiven them. That God’s grace ***is*** complete. And real. And steadfast!

I bring this up because verse 17, to put our text into context, addresses this question. Indeed the disciple John, *whenever he writes*, speaks of love. In his gospel (not to be confused with this, the first of three epistles)….in chapter 14 of his gospel…John cites Jesus himself who says, “Peace….I leave with you**. MY peace**….I give to you. ….Not peace…like the world tempts you with….but deep peace. Eternal peace. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid.”

 And actually, this is a good place to begin our conversation. A tough one….but real.

To have faith, to **be** Christian, does not mean we escape the vagaries of life: the fears of all our years.. They still meet…in us today. Sometimes we may wonder if fear is growing, or worse…winning…in these decades…and century.

Terrorists certainly hope so. Terrorists feed…on our fear. And terrorists in Turkey….and anarchists in Afghanistan…have perfected, more and more, the way to the core where our darkness and doubt lurk. ….I have flown on airlines (so you have you)….where concern…has turned into hand wringing, and ramped up TSA security searches…in the aftermath of onboard incidents.

 But….I would present to you my belief, nay….my understanding, yea…my **conviction**, that there is

**No**

**Fear**

**In love!**

 ***Perfect love***…..(ptchew!) ….makes fear vanish!

 Let’s say, for example, a congregation is facing…huge challenge. Say…they have a financial challenge they’re contemplating…which looks daunting. Some may think…they won’t make it. ☺

 **We do NOT** have to live in fear like that… (and not because we’re living in avoidance or denial but) because God gives us…faith. And our faith…has at its core….Love! *GOD’S love!* Which overcomes…everything.

Do we believe in new life? (Yes!) Do we believe we can do all things in Christ? YES! Is there any reason for us to cling to doubt, and dismay which brings us down? Is there a reason for us to refuse to hope? No.

 Then let us press on. Let’s leap…into the unknown…confident we will be caught in the arms of a loving Lord. Let’s plan… And let’s work the plan.

 Let’s reach out and include…and grow….individually (point to my head with one finger)…spiritually (hand over my heart)….confident…the spark…will become a flame!....catching fire…as others see the Light*.*

 One Easter, in a small town in the Midwest, a family went to church. They were decked out in their Sunday best of course. Dad was in his suit, shoes freshly shined professionally; mom had on lace. Little sister had on her…brand…new….Easter bonnet. Across the congregation of a hundred worshippers there was nothing but sparkling faces and perfume, a few mink stoles warding off the chill of the early April air.

 But just as the preacher started into his sermon, about 30 minutes into the service, the sanctuary doors opened…and in wafted the scent…of disaster. An older lady with greasy, straggly hair…and thin dress, stains all over…began to struggle up the aisle.

 Heads turned, mouths gaped. Eyes startled wide! And it was all made worse by little brother…who hopped up on his pew next to little sister (little sister was on the end of the pew)….and he stood looking backward down the aisle at the approaching storm….and said loudly, “Mommy….**LOOK!”** You could have cut the silence with a pin drop on the freshly cleaned carpet. But it got worse.

The lady continued up the aisle, laboriously struggling as she pulled three gunny sacks…full of fowl smelling….what?! Garbage obviously. And finally she arrived at the family’s pew and chose to sit down on the end…next…to little sister.

 The woman smelled. Stank…really, rank to high heaven! Everyone in four rows cowered away from her to try to avoid the stench. But the lady pulled her bags toward her as she sat down with a plop…right…up…against…the Easter dress…of little sister.

 And then it happened. Because she had stacked…the three, full gunny sacks, up…against the end of the pew…on aisle carpet. First the top one…then the two she had tried to stack on top of….toppled over…spilling their contents down the church aisle.

….Gnawed chicken bones, half eaten apple cores…turned brown with time, banana peels, orange rinds…someone’s week old, left-over lasagna…fowl, smelly fish skin…went tumbling down the carpeted church aisle.

 Shock. Stunned silence…wrapped the scene….as slowly the old woman got on her knees to begin picking up the refuse. She paused long enough to look up at the wondering congregation and say, “It’s for my goats.”….and continued her efforts.

* (Dramatic pause)

 Finally, dad got up from the other end of the family’s pew, walked around half the congregation…and up the aisle…. And deliberately…knelt down…to begin helping the Goat Lady (for that is what town called her)… : to help her pick up her garbage, food for her goats.

The two of them finished. She reclaimed her seat. And the pastor went on preaching.

 But everything…had changed. The gospel had come.

 The family took the goat lady home, to their home..for Easter dinner. And then to her own home, a shanty…a leaning shack on the other side of the tracks in the woods…with her goat pen next to it. And eventually, they became friends of sorts; giving her clothes, taking her to doctors’ appointments, laughing together once in awhile.

All because…Love: true, perfect love…overcomes fear. It banishes awkwardness…into nothingness. It blows away to nothing….unsureness…and cowardice. And this is not something unreal or fanatical. Fear shrinks away…under light… Love unites. …brings together. Love…grows. Overcomes. Love unites us…multiplying confidence and goodness, until at last we are a true reflection of God’s own majesty….in which we are created.

* > > I came to Nebraska…with a goal in mind. I have dream…for us here at Heritage. I’ve put it into words. (Here it is….) My hope is for us

To dream alive a common vision….which will galvanize us to be changed…so that we love like God loves…and our love changes the world around us.

 It’s true. I want, I crave…I eagerly and fervently hope…to ‘dream alive a common vision among us. One that will *galvanize* ***us*** to change the world for the better. A love that changes **us**…and the fire of that love in us….catches like spark…to the world we touch.

 Put succinctly….this vision will succeed…*when we love…like God loves.*

 Can we? Sure we can! We’re already aiming towards it. There is more love and inclusivity, more spirit of adventure and outreach, more willingness to go!....and grow…in this congregation…as we are…than I have seen in churches five times our size! Sincerely.

 Our love…is our greatest asset.

 And weapon. (a sword…beaten into a peace plow, to till the earth)

 And we are just getting started….

 Let’s go…. Boldly. So boldly that we go where no church in Lincoln has dared go before.

 And watch…how we succeed!...at casting out anything…that stands in the way. (Let’s get going in love. And growing…in spirit.)

 Amen.