

August 26, 2018
1 John 4:7-12
Conviction and Love
Michael Stanfield

Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.

Let us pray. Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and Our Redeemer, Amen.

My Great-Great grandfather was not only a farmer, as it turns out, he was a church planter. How that came to be is rather amazing. As the story goes, one day he was out plowing a field far from home when his mule got rambunctious. While attempting to get it under control, the mule kicked him in the head, knocking him out cold and there he lay for almost two full days. He came close to death and, as a result, had some rather spectacular visions of the afterlife. He also heard a voice that commanded him to build a "primitive" church on the spot where he lay. So, for a while, he put farming aside and built a small one-room Primitive Baptist Church. It grew by word of mouth. In its hay day it boasted over a hundred members: not bad for a church planted out in the middle of nowhere.

As a result of that calling, all of my great-great grandfather's children and many of his grandchildren, great-grandchildren (including my mother) and even great-great grandchildren (which includes a few of my cousins) began their faith journey as Primitive Baptists.

Primitive Baptists don't believe in formal education of any kind, and therefore have untrained, uneducated clergy, and no Sunday School. They are extremely fundamentalist. Taking a dim view of instrumental music, they sing acapella in worship using hymnals with shaped notes. Although they believe in God's salvation by grace, they also believe in double-predestination – that is that damnation and salvation were meted by out to all humans before they were born. There is therefore no real surety as to whether one lives under God's grace or God's damnation. It is a harsh, exacting religion that left my grandfather to sit out on his porch into his 80's fretting over the eternal state of soul. But his convictions on the matter were absolute and non-negotiable.

It is ironic that, although he had no greater than a third grade education himself, my grandfather acted as the gatekeeper of religious orthodoxy in the family – even among those with much more education than he – which was just about everyone in the family.

Now, my own call into ministry, like my great-great grandfather's, involved a dream, the beginning of which my grandfather hands me something very important on my journey towards God. I therefore felt it incumbent upon myself, upon hearing the call to go into ministry to do something that was completely out character for me: speak to him about my call and seek his blessing. Since my grandfather was a harsh and often angry man, I did not enjoy being around

him all that much – especially not alone. Of course, he mellowed with age. But still, the prospect of a conversation with him alone at 21 was daunting at best.

I won't go into the full content of the dream I took as my call into ministry but in it, what my grandfather handed me represented the living faith in Christ of the righteous that had been handed down to me going back to my great-great grandfather and beyond. My guess is that if I had simply told my grandfather I felt the call, he would have dismissed me. But dreams and visions were taken seriously and having a powerful dream that involved him, I guessed would make things different. I was right. It gave him pause. Rather than dismiss me, he engaged me in a lesson in the five main points of Calvinism. We talked at length for about an hour.

Now all during this time, my grandmother was also present. My grandmother was the polar opposite of my grandfather. I never saw her get angry. She was a woman whose whole life was lived in sacrificial love. Just staying married to my grandfather was a lesson in sacrificial love all by itself. But it didn't stop there. She lived in complete service to others. On more than one occasion, I witnessed her literally giving the shirt off her back as she gave away clothing and other things she had barely used herself because she came into contact with someone she recognized as needing it more.

At any rate, when it felt like the conversation between my grandfather and I had gone about as far as it could, he turned to my grandmother and asked. "What do you think Lula?" What he really meant was that he was feeling satisfied that indeed, I had received the call and was looking for confirmation. But my grandmother replied simply, "I think God is love and that it's really all just all about love."

I left my grand-parent's house that day having received a double blessing – confirmed in my call by the great patriarch of the family and given the best advice that could ever be given to a young minister of the gospel – that is, to remember that, in the end, it is really all about love.

To this day, I am of the surest certainty that that call to love, as my grandmother had said, is indeed at the very center of the gospel. However, since that day so long ago, I have witnessed that when it comes to genuine expressions of faith, more of us are like my *grandfather* than are like my *grandmother* – that is we have a much easier time sharing our theological convictions *about* Christ than we do our love *for* Christ.

Carl Jung discovered that all humans have access to two basic ways of making sense of the world: Feeling and Thinking – which are polar opposites. Thinking is represented by my grandfather's approach. It attempts to use some objective means to arrive at a single "right" conclusion that is based on some absolute impersonal criteria.

Feeling is represented by my grandmother. It attempts to use subjective values to harmonize disparities in order to create more opportunities for more personal human connections – better environments for love to blossom. Both are important. However, as writer Robert Johnson reminds us, here in the West, as in my grandparent's marriage, thinking is considered next to godliness whereas feeling is considered something that mostly just gets in the way. Writes Johnson:

"Of all the Western languages, English may be the most lacking when it comes to feeling. Imagine what richness would be expressed if one had a specific vocabulary for the love of father,

another for the love of one's mother, yet another for one's camel (the Persians actually had this luxury!), still another for one's lover, another for the sunset! Our world would expand and gain clarity immeasurably if we had such tools.

It is always the inferior function, whether in an individual or a culture, that suffers this poverty. One's greatest treasures are won by the superior function but always at the cost of the inferior function. One's greatest triumphs are accompanied by one's greatest weaknesses. Because thinking is our superior function in the English speaking world (that is, the generally prevailing value or ideal, even if many individuals do not conform to this pattern), it follows automatically that feeling is our inferior function. These two faculties tend to exist at the expense of each other. If one is strong in feeling, one is likely to be inferior in thinking – and vice versa. Our superior function (in the West) has given us our science and the highest standard of living the world had ever known – the envy of the third world – but at the cost of impoverishing the feeling function. This is demonstrated by our meager vocabulary for feeling words. If we had the expanded and exact vocabulary for feeling that we have for science and technology, we would be well on our way to warmth of relatedness and generosity of feeling.” Johnson, Robert, A., *The Fisher King and the Handless Maiden*, Harper Collins, pp 6-8.

... Warmth of relatedness and generosity of feeling...

Think about that for a moment. Why did you join Trinity Presbyterian church or why is it that you consistently worship here? I know what attracted me to this church: it's warmth of relatedness and generosity of feeling. My last church was one whose theological convictions *always* trumped warmth of relatedness and generosity of feeling. I was tired of all the energy that went into debating scripture while people both in that congregation and outside of it suffered.

Here, feeling was, is, valued as much as thinking. Feeling: It carries one towards a sense of embodied relatedness or intimacy with others.

Thinking: It carries one towards meaning and rational interpretation of the faith;

The thinking function uses what is assumed to be an *objective* ultimate theological principle to define the limits and boundaries of human activity.

The feeling function uses a *subjective* experience of God to try and demonstrate what is assumed to be the underlying harmony, *in Christ*, among all God's children.

To simplify it, the thinking function *defines* as it moves toward meaning while the feeling function *blurs* distinctions as it moves towards the experience of heartfelt contact.

And it appears from Paul's letters to the churches that the early church was having trouble finding a balance between these two functions. They either tended to err on the side of thinking, thus becoming judgmental and callous towards one another, or they erred on the side of inferior feeling, tending toward sentimentality, licentiousness and conflict avoidance.

But Paul's point is that since God has revealed himself in Christ, something fantastic has happened; at once, we are shown the way humans were intended to live – not as either/or but as both/and – both holding onto our convictions *and* acting completely out of genuine love.

Jesus, in his life, death and resurrection showed us this way; and then when his Spirit was unleashed on the church, the book of Acts, in the 4th chapter, gives testimony as to what this way can look like:

“Now the whole group of all who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common. With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. They laid it at the apostle’s feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need.” Acts 4:32-35 NRSV.

I point this out because – *our* cultural context – Western and English speaking – has moved away from living out of a oneness in Christ because it has moved more towards either/or thinking. Either feeling or thinking, either unity or purity, either justice or mercy, either orthodoxy or inclusion. Rather than *both/and*, we have generally chosen to stress our conclusions *about* God over our experience *of* God’s love – often to the exclusion of real love shared and lived out in the world among the loveless – as Christ most surely did.

And it doesn’t matter whether one is on the more liberal end of the church or the more conservative. The result is the same – a whole lotta conviction based on arrived at meaning without a whole lotta real love, person to person.

Yet we are called to do both: maintain our convictions that are part of who we are, while choosing to remain connected with a stance of loving presence – with an accent on the loving part.

And what is a sure sign that we are acting out of love? Well Paul says that we are patient; we are kind; we are not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. Most of all, we do not insist on our own way; we are not irritable or resentful; we don’t rejoice in wrongdoing that proves us to be right. No we rejoice only in the truth. When we are moving out of love, we are willing to bear all things, believe all things, hope all things, endure all things.

So what are we to do – give up our arrived at convictions for the sake of love? By no means. A true test of genuine love is the ability to hold to one’s convictions while at the same time acting only out of what promotes love – love of God and love of neighbor.

And what does this look like? It looks like several people I know in this very Church. But I will not embarrass them by naming them publicly in a sermon. I will be glad to share with you privately if you like but publicly I will share with you that this combination looks a lot like a woman by the name of Fran Dotterweich.

Fran is a Bible Teacher in Knoxville– not only twice a week at Sequoyah Hills where I was a pastor, but two to three more times a week out in in the community. Fran’s personal convictions, where the scriptures are concerned take her to a place that is much stricter than that of the Presbyterian Church (USA) and more strict than where I end up on most issues. For instance, Fran concludes that where official service of women as elders and deacons of the church is concerned, the scriptures seem quite clear. The early church only elected men to those positions. So, whereas, she has been asked a number of times to serve as an officer, she has always conscientiously declined.

Yet Fran has neither left the PC(USA) nor crusaded to change it more to her liking. No, instead she decided a long time ago to do something much more radical – no less radical than Jesus himself. She decided a long time ago to do something she continues to do to this day – and that is love the church and its people as Christ would love them regardless of socio-economic status, education level, race, sexual orientation or religious affiliation.

And what a love it is. I often considered Fran as a kind of unofficial extra pastor at Sequoyah Hills. She served and ministered to many in ways that would put much of the official pastoral work of my fellow ordained clergy to shame.

Fran holds to her convictions. Yet when it comes to others, she chooses to act out of her love for our Lord. In reality, I think that is what Paul finally decided to do with those insufferable former pagan Greeks to whom he was called as an Apostle.

And I think it is what we are called as a church to do today. As we look out on the culture of which we are a part, everywhere I look, I see people who are full of convictions. What I don't see much of is personal sacrifice in order to remain connected to those who don't share those convictions.

In fact, what I see more and more is how small the disagreement actually has to be before it erupts, not just in mass rudeness, but in deathly violence. The world out there has become cynical and shrill and completely divided over their interpretations of what constitutes real human-beingness.

As God's people, we are called to heal that. And it doesn't mean that we have to leave our own convictions at the door.

Martin Marty is an American religious scholar who has written extensively on religion in the United States. He says that, "One of the real problems in our society is that people who are good at being kind often lack strong convictions; while people who have strong convictions often have trouble being kind." Richard Mouw, *Uncommon Decency: Christian Civility in an Uncivil World*, (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 12.

Holding on to both means sacrifice. When our convictions are strong, hanging in there with one whose convictions are very different is incredibly hard.

But remember this: People do not care what you know until they really know that you care.

In other words, perhaps the only conviction that really matters ultimately is that God is love.

Let us pray: Gracious God, we thank you that you give us boldness to speak from our convictions. Give us also the humility to act out of your love for all your people.

And bless these gifts that we may use them to proclaim to the world who you are: love incarnate. In Christ's name we pray, Amen.