

I John 4:7-11 "Love One Another"

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[0 : 00] You are listening to a message from Southwood Presbyterian Church in Huntsville, Alabama. Our passion is to experience and express grace. Join us.

This recording is a fresh recording of this sermon due to a technical glitch during our service on Sunday. I hope you'll pick up one of these pew cards about the summer of one another and do be praying with us about how you can lean into that together as we're hoping to both learn and experience together the Holy Spirit shaping us into a gospel community, a community of people bound together by the work of Jesus, transformed together by the grace of Jesus, and sent out together on the mission of Jesus.

That mission is where we started last week, talking about the purpose for which God has made us His people, to declare and demonstrate God's glory and grace here and everywhere.

God answers the loneliness of this world with the life-giving relationships of His church. So now as we dive into what those relationships are to look like, how we relate to one another in this body, I want to begin this morning with a bit of an extended introduction about our problem of loneliness.

This will be addressed in today's passage as well as throughout the summer as we talk about these one another passages. Did you know there will be a lonely person in your next conversation?

[2 : 01] Statistically speaking, when you're at the office tomorrow and run into a co-worker, one of you is regularly lonely. When you're talking with a couple of friends at the pool tonight, one of them is probably lonely.

A huge study of Americans last year from Cigna reveals nearly half of us sometimes or always feel lonely, left out.

And every time a study comes out, the statistics on loneliness just get worse. You've probably heard by now of a loneliness epidemic. It's becoming a fairly common medical term.

Many studies showing that the health effects of loneliness are similar to smoking 15 cigarettes a day. This led former U.S.

Surgeon General Vivek Murthy to say, During my years caring for patients, the most common pathology I saw was not heart disease or diabetes.

[3 : 05] It was loneliness. And it's this epidemic that led British Prime Minister Theresa May last year to create a senior level position in her government called Minister of Loneliness.

And to seek ways to address this growing problem where there's over 9 million British people often or always lonely. And she said, For far too many people, loneliness is the sad reality of modern life. We are a society that's bought the lie that happiness is an individual accomplishment. It's what New York Times columnist David Brooks says.

He writes, If I can have just one more victory, lose 15 pounds, or get better at meditation, then I will be happy. But people looking back on their lives from their deathbeds tell us that happiness is found amid thick and loving relationships.

It's found by defeating self-sufficiency for a state of mutual dependence. It's easy to say you live for relationships, but it's very hard to do. It's hard to see other people in all their complexity.

[4 : 16] It's hard to communicate from your depths, not your shallows. It's hard to stop performing. Brooks is right, isn't he?

We've bought the lie of self-sufficiency in our culture of individualism. Where participation in non-profit community organizations, religious institutions, parent-teacher associations, anything with a group is rapidly declining.

In fact, from 1980 to 2000, there was a 33% decline in family dinners. The rate of having others in our homes dropped nearly in half in that time, and the decline continues.

According to these statistics, many of you won't be surprised by these statistics, because you felt this loneliness. No one gets me.

No one really knows me. No one understands me. See, it's not merely physical isolation where there literally is no one with you.

[5 : 31] This loneliness is more relational, emotional. People are lonely in all sorts of places with other people around them. You may be lonely in a marriage, on a college campus, in a nursing home, amidst a busy office, with a 90-day snap streak, while surrounded by kids.

It's easy to be alone in a room full of people if no one really knows or understands or gets me. So what that means is that it is easy to be alone right here. In this room full of people, it's actually quite easy to be alone.

And loneliness is often true and actually quite acutely felt at church. My awareness of the loneliness is heightened by the fact there are so many people around, but no one who understands me.

No meaningful relational connection. I almost started this sermon with a video like the ones you've seen on the news, where the victims are blacked out, silhouetted to conceal their identity, so they can tell their story in their own words, but you don't know who they are.

[6 : 57] And I thought about having several Southwood members tell of how they feel lonely at church. I decided that was a bit melodramatic, and you would believe me if I told you some of the stories myself.

I've talked with people here who've said things like this to me. I love this church, but I just don't have any really good friends here.

I'm not sure there's anyone who really gets me. Or they've said, we used to feel so connected here at Southwood, but so many of our friends have left over the years, and we're having a hard time finding our place now.

Or, we found this church to be one of the friendliest we've ever visited, but after being here a couple years, we're struggling to develop deep connections and meaningful relationships.

I don't say these things to shame us. I tell you these stories as a reminder of how much we specifically need God's answers to our loneliness.

[8 : 12] It's not an epidemic that's out there somewhere where other people are lonely. It's a struggle right here in this room, in this community.

If you don't feel it, others around you do. When you have a conversation in the hallway after church, one of you is likely lonely.

What's even worse if you read about loneliness is the answers that many offer. I won't bore you with all the prescriptions, but one from a prominent psychiatrist stuck out because it reveals our blindness in this.

Her answer to the loneliness and isolation you feel, and I quote, befriend yourself. Thankfully, God answers our loneliness.

In fact, we're only learning these days more about what He has seen from the beginning. It is not good for man to be alone.

[9 : 21] He created us in His image, the image of the triune God, Father, Son, Holy Spirit, and perfect relationship. He created us as relational beings.

So when He looks at His good, good, very good creation and says, it's not good for man to be alone, that's a relational status, not a marital status.

And yes, God gives Himself in relationship, walking and talking with the man, but He also wants the man to have another human, a woman, a friend, a companion like Him.

So when mankind falls and sin breaks our relationship with God, and our relationship with each other, God answers that broken relationship, that lonely isolation, by sending His Son to redeem and to institute not merely individuals who know God and have relationship with Him, but even more than that, a church, a family, a community shaped by the gospel.

God answers the broken loneliness of this world, yours and mine, with gospel community.

[10 : 39] And He tells us what the relationships in that community ought to look like. That's the backdrop from the Garden of Eden to today, of God telling us about one anothering.

This morning, take a Bible, turn to 1 John chapter 4, and we will start with the most common of the one another's in the New Testament, love one another.

If you've got your Bible, this is a great example this morning of a time where the best place for you to get distracted during the sermon is these verses all around, the ones we're going to read.

It's why I want you to have a Bible in your hands. If you get distracted, 1 John 3, 1 John 4, the whole chapter, they're talking about these same things. So you can read more about it there.

But this morning, we're going to read 1 John 4, starting at verse 7. This is God's Word. Beloved, let us love one another.

[11 : 43] For love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love. In this, the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent His only Son into the world so that we might live through Him.

And this is love, not that we have loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation, the atoning sacrifice for our sins.

Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. Father, let's pray. Father, we thank You for Your Word, and we ask for Your help that You would not only teach us, but by Your Spirit that You would transform and mold our hearts that we might know Your love and show Your love to others.

In Jesus' name, Amen. Let us love one another. We ought to love one another.

In many ways, when we talk about loving one another, we're talking about the foundation of the relationships God calls us into in His church. Many of these one another's that we'll be talking about build off of this one and live it out in different situations of life.

[13 : 16] As I've read through this and other passages where God commands us to love one another, I've written this working description of love for us.

Three parts. It's deeply felt value moving toward one another in sacrificial action.

deeply felt value. In other words, love involves our emotions, feeling something toward someone else, right?

We're told to love one another deeply and earnestly and from the heart, genuinely finding someone else significant and valuable in themselves.

Where is that value going to come from when you don't really like someone different from you?

We'll see that as we go.

[14 : 12] But something's got to happen if we're going to love them from the heart. Of course, it's a feeling that leads also to actions.

Sacrificial action. The love God felt led Him to give, right? God so loved the world that He gave.

That love here is a verb. That love looks like something, John says. And what it looks like is sending His Son into the world that we might live through Him.

The agape love, that's the word John uses throughout this passage for love, is both God's love and our love. Same word over and over.

For John, it's this consistently active, even condescending love that is, it's tangible and for the good of someone else because the lover places value upon them even when it's not deserved.

[15 : 19] Even when bending down to reach them. And so as God does, love acts in costly, sacrificial ways for the good of the other.

It's the way God has loved us and the way we are to love one another. Not just feeling it, but showing it. You know what this is like.

Some of you are married to someone like me who says, I love you a lot. Maybe too often. And sometimes, when that love is not being demonstrated by my thoughtful action, it's even frustrating to be told that that feeling is there.

See, it's missing something when I stand next to an overgrown yard and while watching the football game, tell my wife, I love her.

You might feel like saying even, no way, don't tell me that again until I can see it. Until you show me. And at the same time, most of us wouldn't feel very loved by a friend or spouse who did all of the things we expected dutifully, checked off all the lists, but claimed to feel nothing at all for us.

[16 : 36] You see my list of completed projects? I love her. No. You're always disrespectful and constantly cold and completely uncaring toward her.

No, that's not love. Love is deeply felt value combined with sacrificial action. They go together and even feed each other, don't they?

Significantly, those two things happen as love moves towards another with those feelings and actions.

See, this is where you'll notice that love is a verb with an object where our call is to move into relationship, not just generically to love.

We're not just told love, love generally. No, love God, love neighbor, love enemies, love brothers and sisters, love, in this case, one another.

[17 : 41] In our passage, particularly, love those within the family of God. Within your church family, there must be someone whose life you are entering with your love.

You're engaging in relationship, removing their aloneness as you bend towards them. Love pushes you toward one another because you value them.

You're willing to sacrifice for them in a relationship where you even pay the price to enter in, to understand someone different from you. We talk about being driven by relationships and our core commitments here at Southwood.

We say we genuinely love people and are committed to developing life-giving relationships inside and outside the church. These relationships with others created in God's image are a reflection of the relational nature of the Trinity.

And we share the heart of God when we put others before ourselves and are willing to share our lives with them. Sounds good, but it's fair to ask, do we really love people or are we just friendly on Sunday mornings?

[18 : 56] Do we put legs on our love in one another's lives? Do we really find ourselves and others pulled out of lonely isolation into true community?

Now hear me, I'm not down on Southwood here. Y'all love well so often and love my family so well. But going deeper is hard, isn't it?

And even when we do well, when God commends a church for its love, the command is typically love more and more. Don't stop loving. Continue to overflow with love toward one another.

Don't stop. There's always room to grow in this vital area. Tertullian writes that it was said of Christians in the first couple centuries, see how they love one another.

They are even willing to die for one another. We've celebrated this week many who loved like that 75 years ago on D-Day and we've marveled at how hard that kind of sacrificial love must be.

[20 : 05] It's hard. It requires a lot. I mean, I don't think I've ever seen anyone die for someone else during a worship service here in this room.

True love that removes loneliness doesn't happen during the meet and greet time. It may start there, but it doesn't end there. To do what God is calling us to here involves intentional, personal sacrifice that can only happen when I've entered into someone's life in relationship, beginning to learn who they are, how I can show love to them particularly.

It's why you'll hear us say over and over this summer we want everyone at Southwood in a small group and or a connect community. Those are not the only places loneliness can be put to death where I like to say loneliness goes to die.

They're not the only places that happens, but they're good steps toward knowing and being known in relationship. We can't say as a church that we love our homebound members if we don't make time to visit them.

We can't say as a church that we love youth if we don't make a priority of leading a small group for them, showing up in their lives consistently. Maybe that's the small group you should be in this fall.

[21 : 25] We can't say as a church that we love families if we don't spend enough time listening to understand why the middle-aged couple in the hallway seems sad or tired.

Are they struggling in their marriage with their kids? Something else? Do you even know? I didn't say loving one another would be comfortable or easy.

Neither did God. In fact, he said it would be costly. In a gospel community, you'll have to love plenty of people that you wouldn't put on your own list who are not easy for you to love.

The value, valuing the other is the key. I value myself, but we must value one another because you won't move toward another with sacrificial action unless you actually value them.

And often, unfortunately, we don't. You've said it before of someone. We don't click.

[22 : 33] He's just awkward. She's so difficult or condescending. And those things may be true, but here's the beauty of love in God's family.

They may be difficult for you to love, but God loves him. But she is valuable, precious to God.

God sent his son and Jesus gave his precious blood for that one who's hard for you to love. Her sins that you can hardly stand to put up with that drive you crazy.

Jesus cares about them and gave his precious blood for those sins. How dare we value someone less than God does?

How dare we say he's not worth the trouble to me? What does love look like, pastor? I want to be loving, but it's so hard.

[23 : 33] How do I do that? Where does it come from? Y'all, it is hard, but it's not complicated. We love because he first loved us.

God sent his own son into the world that we might live through him. And this is love that God paid a price that we can't even imagine to move toward you and me and toward every one of your brothers and sisters and bring us into a family together where that love defines our relationship.

Southwood, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. I want to challenge you to put a face on love today, to put a name on love, make it personal.

I want you to just pick one person, pick now or pray about it this afternoon, perhaps, one person to move toward in one way this summer.

I'll take him to lunch, I'll visit her and ask her to share her story, I'll spend time with that young person or that old person. Bonus points if you pick someone you struggle to value and love already.

[24 : 48] But can you just imagine with me for a minute, imagine what that would do to our community if every one of us entered thoughtfully, even sacrificially, into the life of one other person this summer.

Statistically speaking, we'd remove a lot of aloneness. A lot of loneliness would be gone. Practically speaking, we would see a network of life-giving relationships that would multiply in our community. Missionally speaking, people in our community, those around us, the watching world, would see the reality of the love of God and the compelling worth of a God who loves us and calls us to love and live for Him.

I dream of homebound members tired from so many visits and sending us to their neighbors at the nursing home because they're so exhausted by so many of us showing up.

I dream of young people outnumbered by the adults who show up to love them, having to send some adults to another room to pray so the room they're in still feels like youth group.

[25 : 56] I dream of marriages where small group friends see struggles before you do and offer so much support that you don't despair even in those times where marriage is really hard because you're so supported you're not alone.

Each Sunday all summer we're going to get to see a different aspect of what this looks like and how God teaches us to love and relate to each other. He's going to give us another brush as it were in relationship with one another to paint one more beautiful stroke on the picture of gospel community. That picture that Jesus started painting when he painted you and me into the picture with his own blood. A picture in fact that will be perfected as God lives with us and we live with him and each other forever, right?

There ain't no darkness strong enough that could tear you out from my heart. There ain't no strength that's strong enough that could tear this love apart.

No, I won't let you go. Do you hear Jesus saying that to you this morning? Will you say it to someone else?

[27 : 16] Let's pray. Father, teach us, mold us, change us into the kind of community that you would have us to be.

Overwhelm us with the love of Jesus. Give us a fresh glimpse of your love for us and your love for others in our family that we might love as you love.

We ask in Jesus' name. Amen. We welcome our children and their parents back in to celebrate the Lord's Supper with us this morning.

As they come, I want to remind you of some really good news. Someone who knows you completely longs to be with you.

Someone who knows the worst about you chooses to love you and will never stop. Jesus said this to his disciples.

[28 : 19] Jesus, on the night that he was betrayed, took bread and he broke it and gave it to his disciples as I'm ministering in his name. Give this bread to you. He said, take, eat, this is my body broken for you.

Do this in remembrance of me. In the same way, after supper, he took the cup and said, this cup is the new covenant in my blood shed for many for the forgiveness of sins. Drink from it, all of you.

Whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim his death, his great demonstration of his love until he comes. This is love.

Not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his son as the atoning sacrifice for our sins. God demonstrates his own love in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.

If you've never known and tasted and trusted love like that, you need to meet Jesus. His love is awesome and is always like that.

[29 : 24] We'd love to tell you more about it. We'd encourage you not to come to this table this morning, but to come and talk with us about Jesus. We'd love to talk and pray with you about him. But if you've tasted that love, you're a part of Christ's church in any local body, not just this one.

Come, feast with us and celebrate the love that will never let us go, that God gives to us with one another. Let's pray. For more information, visit us online at southwood.org.

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