

This morning we begin Part 3 of our “Believe” sermon series. Part 1 addressed the question of “What do I believe” and we looked at 10 core beliefs of the Christian faith; Part 2 built on that, and addressed the question of “in light of what I believe,” “What shall I do?” And we looked at 10 ways we live out our faith, such as studying God’s Word, using our time and our talents and our treasure well, and more. And Part 3 is then looking at the core of who we are – not just what we do, but who we are, at the core: Who is God shaping us to be: our values, our character, our humanity. So the question that part 3 revolved around is “Who am I becoming?”

Last week as part 2 drew to a close I mentioned that Part 3 would begin today and that our world could use a little more consideration of this question of “Who am I becoming?” From shootings to marital unfaithfulness, from addictions to personal and corporate greed, there are a lot of challenges in our society. The college entrance scandal from a couple weeks ago is a great example. What are those people becoming, and teaching their children? I mean, I get it that the pressure to be “successful” is immense. We all want our children to succeed and have the best opportunities in life. That’s why I’ve already started stockpiling information, awards, achievements, and photos about my kids for their college applications, such as these 4 Pictures: **(Blakely/Bode Miller; Hailey/Laurie Hernandez and the US Gymnastics Team at 2016 Olympics; Brooke/Carla Korbis [PNB principal ballerina]; Elliott/Michael Jordan).**

So, we can all benefit from considering this question: Who am I becoming? That’s what we’re looking at in this third and final part of “Believe.” With that introduction to Part 3, let’s pray and then dive into today’s passage...

1 John 4:7-16, followed by **Video Clip: L-O-V-E.**

Pop music wouldn’t be what it is without love, would it? We wouldn’t have that song – L-O-V-E. Without “love” to sing about, would the Beatles ever have made it or even existed? Where would poetry be without love? Elizabeth Barrett Browning couldn’t have penned these famous words: “How

do I love thee? Let me count the ways...” Movies such as *Casablanca*, and *Sense and Sensibility* owe their storylines to “love.” And even if some of us might prefer to watch a movie more like the Matrix over those, the fact is, **“Love” is a part of being human.** It is something we all need: To know that we are loved lets us know we are valued and accepted by somebody. In fact, that is a big reason why people get married, whether they recognize it or not: It’s not just the *love you have* for the other person, but the fact that *they love you* as well. And let’s be honest, that’s no small miracle sometimes. Gwen loving me is proof that God exists and miracles happen. Knowing that you are loved can be a huge confidence-builder, and can sustain you in times of difficulty and challenge and pain.

Like the young man said to his father at breakfast one morning, “Dad, I’m going to get married.” “How do you know you’re ready to get married?” asked the father. “Are you in love?” “I sure am,” said the son. “How do you know you’re in love?” asked the father. “Last night as I was kissing my girlfriend good-night, her dog bit me and I didn’t feel the pain until I got home.” Love can spur on a person to push through a lot, right?

Now, we should probably recognize that we say we “love” a lot of different things. I might say that I love chocolate, I love my wife, and I love skiing. Clearly, *one* of those “loves” is different than the others, right? I mean: my love for chocolate is *not* the same as my love for my wife and skiing. ☺ It’s different than the other two loves. And if I actually communicated that to my wife, she would respond by saying, “It’s ok, honey, I love you more each day...as my other options diminish.”ⁱ

So we speak of “love” in different ways...we have different meanings of the word...and we oftentimes think of it mostly as an emotion or a feeling. But this morning’s belief statement helps us see that genuine love, love with some depth to it, is more than that. Today’s statement is, **“I am committed to loving God and loving others.”** Love is a commitment, a decision, and it comes from deep within us. In fact, Galatians 5:22 says it is a fruit of the Spirit. It’s something that manifests itself in our lives when the Holy Spirit dwells in us, when we have a relationship with God through faith in Jesus Christ.

So the first thing to recognize about real, genuine love – the kind that can love your spouse as well as your enemies, and if those are one and the same, please talk to me after church today – ...the first thing to recognize about it is that it becomes a part of our lives when we are in relationship with God. Why? Because God is love. You can't read this morning's passage and miss the central role love plays in who God is. Some 16 times, in ten verses, the word "love" (loves, loved, too) occurs. And the statement that ought to cause us to sit up and really pay attention is the statement: **"God is love."**

Those three words tell us more about the nature of God than anything else. They tell us who God is, what his character is like, what his intentions are for us, how he views us, and more. What's amazing is that God and his love never change. In spite of our waywardness, in spite of people straying and turning away from God, he doesn't change, because at the core, God is love. For instance, the Bible tells us that **"Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever" (Hebrews 13:8)**. That sounds pretty constant and unchanging, doesn't it? The Psalms are full of passages about God's steadfastness and his faithfulness in loving us, such as in Psalm 86, where we find these words, **"But you, O Lord, are a compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness" (Psalm 86:15)**. God is real love. True love.

And in order for love to be lived out, it must have an object of its affection. Love cannot exist in a vacuum. And the object of God's love is people. Verse 9 tells us that God has shown his love by sending His Son. I don't think it needs any explanation, but just to make sure we're all on the same page: The Son of God being talked about here is Jesus (and the passage goes on to make that clear, too).

The coming of God into the world in Christ Jesus shows us the nature and character of God. Jesus lived on earth because of his love for creation...because he loves you and me. But Christians are not just a people of Jesus' *arrival* in human form. No one wears jewelry with mangers, for example – even at Christmas. And yet people wear crosses all the time. We have them in our homes and in our churches, because we're a people of the

cross (and the empty tomb, but that's a hard one to put on a necklace or earrings, too). And so we can never forget that: **It was on the cross that His love for you and for me was demonstrated most profoundly.**

This is such a great reminder that love is not so much a feeling, but action. If you tell someone you love them, but then your actions toward them indicate something else, then there's good reason for them to question whether or not you really do love them. A few weeks ago Gwen and I were at a restaurant and I happened to notice the people at the tables on either side of us. Each table was occupied by a guy and a gal out on a date. I have no idea about the state of their relationships – whether each couple was married or it was their first date. The lasting impression I have from my observations, however, is that neither couple liked each other, because at both tables, at least one of the people, if not both, were staring at their phone most of the time. So, presuming that they were both couples who'd been together for some time, and *had* expressed that they loved each other, the actions at the table sure didn't indicate so – at least, not to my way of thinking. And if they were *first* dates, I'm guessing they were also their last dates.

Similarly, if the Bible told us that God loved us, but we never saw any evidence of God's love, it would be hard to believe. But in Jesus Christ we have an announcement from the throne room of heaven itself, which says, "I love you." That means that God loves me, and God loves you. And that love doesn't change even though we, in our fickle ways, are constantly changing, wavering, straying, and faltering. In a word: we sin. But God keeps on loving us.

And when we have a relationship with God and that love is poured into us through faith in Jesus and by God's Spirit, we also have that love in us. We don't live it out perfectly, of course. C.S. Lewis writes in *Mere Christianity*, **"On the whole, God's love for us is a much safer subject to think about than our love for Him"** (C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*). But that shouldn't stop us from thinking about and doing what we can to be more loving.

And it starts with who we are at the core. Just as this morning's passage says, "God is love" and so his actions flow out of that, so also our love – which the

passage speaks to as well...so also our love, which is demonstrated in actions, is rooted in our very being. All people have the capacity to love, because all people are created in the image of this God of love. **But the invitation from God for those who follow Jesus is to be Christ-like: to let love be the foundation for who we are.**

This is where the Holy Spirit comes into play, as the Spirit transforms us to be more Christ-like, more loving. Scripture speaks to this transformative work in various places, but Romans 12:2 says we are to be transformed by the renewing of our minds. If we're going to love as God does...if love is going to be at the core of who we are...it's not just our hearts that need transforming, but our minds. How we think – about the world, about God, about the people around us, about how we are going to live and engage with people.

And sometimes the first place we need to start is with the people we spend the most time with, and are closest to. The ones we love the most are also the ones we have the capacity to hurt the most. When you first meet someone, loving them can be easy. Especially in the case of romantic love. It's been said, **“Love at first sight is easy to understand. It's when two people have been looking at each other for years that it becomes a miracle.”** Isn't that true? This is why it's such a miracle that God loves us...and it's no less of a miracle that a husband and a wife love each other 10, 20, 40, 60 years into a marriage.

To get there takes the work of God to renew our minds and keep renewing them. Love is much more of a mental decision than an emotional response. Jesus gets at this when he teaches about how we show that we love Him. He says, **“If you love me, you will obey my commands” (John 14:15).** Obedience doesn't usually start with the heart – it starts with the mind. It's a decision we make to do what needs to be done, to do the right thing.

Newspaper columnist and marriage counselor George Crane (anyone remember his syndicated newspaper columns called “The Worry Clinic” and “Horse Sense”?) tells of a wife who came into his office full of hatred toward

her husband.ⁱⁱ “I do not only want to get rid of him, I want to get even. Before I divorce him, I want to hurt him as much as he has me.”

Dr. Crane suggested an ingenious plan. “Go home and act as if you really love your husband. Tell him how much he means to you. Praise him for every decent trait. Go out of your way to be as kind, considerate, and generous as possible. Spare no efforts to please him, to enjoy him. Make him believe you love him. After you've convinced him of your undying love and that you cannot live without him, then drop the bomb. Tell him that you're getting a divorce. That will really hurt him.” With revenge in her eyes, she smiled and exclaimed, “Beautiful, beautiful. Will he ever be surprised!” And she did it with enthusiasm. Acting “as if.”

For two months she showed love, kindness, listening, giving, reinforcing, sharing, and more. When she didn't return [to his office], Crane called. “Are you ready now to go through with the divorce?” “Divorce?” she exclaimed. “Never! I discovered I really do love him.” Her actions had changed her feelings. Motion resulted in emotion. **The ability to love is established not so much by fervent promise as it is by often repeated deeds.**ⁱⁱⁱ

And that happens when we make a mental decision to love Jesus by obeying Him, and then to love others as well. Let the spirit of God transform you by the renewing of your mind, so that you would make decisions to show love to the people in your life. It just might transform your relationships – whether that's your spouse, your neighbors, co-workers or classmates, or whoever. Making the decision to treat them with love can transform the relationship. And it helps us to see that we can be loving towards the people in our lives, even if we don't feel in love or feel loving. But we can't do this completely on our own. We aren't God – newsflash, right? – we can't say “Brian is love” or “Barbara is love” or “John is love.” It just doesn't work. But we can know the one who is love, be in relationship with Him, read His Word, and His Spirit will transform us. He's the one who has given you life, who's demonstrated his love on the cross, and who loves us even when we really are unlovable. And with His Spirit in us, we can bear this fruit of the Spirit called love, giving a little glimpse of who God is to the people in our lives.

As we're doing each Sunday in this series, we'll close by joining our voices together as one to affirm today's belief statement: **"I am committed to loving God and loving others."** Just remember, it starts with God's unfailing love for you because God is love, and our love for God and others grows from there. Let's pray...Amen.

ⁱ I'm not the originator of this. I came across it online this week in a meme.

ⁱⁱ <https://bible.org/illustration/wife-who-wanted-divorce>. As near as I can tell, based on the research I did, this story is true. I have made one alteration: This story usually says he was a columnist and minister. However, it doesn't appear he actually was a minister - though he did teach Adult Bible Study classes at a Methodist church in Chicago for 35 years. So maybe that qualifies him as a "minister." But it doesn't appear he formally was. He was, however, a marriage counselor, and so I've substituted that title for "minister."

ⁱⁱⁱ This quote in bold text is part of the way the story came to me, and is included in each of the places I found it...it's not mine. It's attributed to someone named J. Allan Peterson.