

“Perfect Love” / First John 4:7-21 / 6 May 2012

“Perfect love casts out fear,” First John states, “There is no fear in love, for perfect love casts out fear.” That, my friends, is as beautiful a truth as you will find in all the pages of any sacred book of any of the world’s religions. In fact, for my money, it just might be the best one-liner in all the Bible. It’s true that those four New Testament books named after the disciple John are all a little hard to read. They meander. They’re full of abstraction. But amid all the tangents and the talking-in-circles, the John books have a way of speaking razor-sharp truth, like a longwinded but very wise old sage, like Polonius in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*. “Perfect love casts out fear.” The only thing left to fear, then, is imperfect love. For although perfect love truly does cast it out, imperfect love actually generates...fear.

Let me tell you the story of the worst beach vacation since the invasion of Normandy, because it’s also a story of competing, imperfect loves and the conflict they create. My mother-in-law has a longstanding tradition of taking all her children, and their spouses, and their kids, her grandchildren, to the Outer Banks in the summer. She rents a large beach house with balconies and bedroom suites and all the luxurious amenities: a pool table, a Jacuzzi, a swimming pool, an immense flatscreen TV—though who would want to watch TV when the ocean is a block away I don’t know. (Actually, I do know who...because that TV is turned on to ESPN all day every day of the beach vacation.) Of course, as her children have gotten married and given her more and more grandchildren, the beach vacation has become increasingly hard to orchestrate, so it no longer happens every year. It’s just so unwieldy to get four families under one roof. But, as the novelist Saul Bellow once said, “There always comes a day of tears and madness.” On the beach vacation, that day...is Wednesday. There’s always a major blowout by Wednesday. It’s true. My wife, and her sister, and her mother rediscover all their deepest inner turmoil with each other after three whole days together. They cry, and yell, and mope, while their husbands nervously pretend to watch ESPN, or in my case, walk along the ocean. Then the storm passes, and it’s smooth sailing until Sunday, when we all go home. But one year, I found myself unaccustomedly at the center of the conflict.

Chloe’s much larger boy-cousin took to bullying her...mostly pushing. She would be going about her business (from my perspective: picking flowers or running in the sand) and this behemoth of a child would come charging up behind her and shove her for no reason. Several times she was hurt pretty badly. Now, most of us become unreasonable when we feel that someone we love is being hurt. But I’ve got a particular protectiveness about that child...for reasons that you can guess. And the whole thing became very ugly very fast. I’ll spare you the sordid details, but the point is that my ugliness met with equal ugliness from other concerned parties, and it all degenerated into a spiral of anger, and hard words, and injured feelings. If I had to say exactly what went wrong, I’d have to admit that I just loved my child more than I loved my nephew. It’s completely natural. I was more concerned for her welfare than his. And that imperfect love...meant trouble.

Nowadays—five years later—the family knows me as the weird, bald uncle who corrects other people’s kids. It’s just a given that if I see my nephews acting up, I’ll speak to them sternly. And it’s okay now because it’s become clear to them, to their parents, and to me that I really do love them. But back in the day, we were still learning how to deal with those inter-family issues. Back in the day, it was not clear to my sister-

in-law that I loved her child, and it was not clear to me that she loved mine. We were limping along with less-than-perfect loves, each of us focusing our care mostly on our own child, our own spouse. And out of these small commitments, these imperfect loves, a kind of distrust was born. If perfect love casts out fear, imperfect love creates it.

All love is good, but some loves are too small. All love is good, but small love actually generates fear. Small love builds fences, saying, "This one is mine. I'll care for her. That one is yours. You see to him." The irony of it all is that hatred itself is the ugly byproduct of our fearful little loves. Imperfect love is the author of hatred, for when my love is limited to my own, then I fear that your loves will harm my loves. Hate is little more than imperfect loves, clashing. Imperfect loves, competing. Imperfect loves, trying to protect from some real or imagined threat. The Buddha said it well when he said, "Have one love, have one worry. Have two loves, have two worries." And it's true, for as soon as I begin to love you, then I also begin to fear for you: your well-being, your happiness, your future. But "perfect love," First John says, "perfect love casts out fear."

Then where does hate come from? Don't you think hate is just misshapen love, small love, love held in fear? The movie *Syriana*, like most of my favorite films, follows the seemingly unconnected lives of a variety of characters all over the world, but finally by the end of the movie, their connectedness is revealed. In one of the storylines, there's a lonely, impoverished young Arab in some nameless Middle Eastern city. The movie traces his recruitment into a terrorist cell, showing how even a terrorist, in all his deadly hate, is typically a poverty-stricken, frustrated idealist whose love for his own culture and faith gets twisted and manipulated by some oily recruiter with a big agenda. It's not out of malice that the terrorist surrenders his life in a suicide mission. No, when a 22-year old guy from the slums of Kabul drives a speed boat full of explosives into the side of a Western oil tanker, he does it out of some desperate, twisted kind of love, thinking that what he is doing will serve the cause he has come to believe in. Ironically, he does it out of imperfect love.

Here's an uncomfortable little exercise to try at home. If you don't believe that love gives rise to hate, then think about the things or the people you most dislike in this world. Who are your least favorites, those who—in your most honest moments—you might even admit to hating? The politicians, the public figures, and the acquaintances, the family members! Think about the various industries, and corporations, the polluters, and the shortsighted money-grubbers, and the self-serving toadies, the terrorist networks, the public enemies. Isn't your disgust for them born out of your love for something else? They threaten something you love...and so you hate them.

After fifty years of turbulent marriage, an old man's wife died. When the funeral ended, they were carrying her casket down the rickety back staircase of the old church, but one of the pallbearers tripped on an uneven step. They dropped the casket, which slid down the stairs and hit the ground with a thud. The impact shook her so hard, the old woman woke up and lived another ten years, after which she died again. The same pallbearers carried her through the same church. But this time the old widower—now in his nineties—shouted, "I know it's the long way around, and lord knows she's heavy. But take her down the front steps this time!" All love is good, but most love is too small.

Perfect love casts out fear; imperfect love generates it. But do we ever really get to a place where our love is big enough? Last Sunday, Mary Good gave me an article from *The Wall Street Journal* about the so-called "trust molecule." It's a simple chemical

called oxytocin; it's found in all humans, but it's best known as the hormone that surges into women's brains when they bear a child. Oxytocin creates feelings of tenderness and caring in the human brain. It also gives rise to self-sacrifice, honesty, and generosity. The levels of oxytocin in the bloodstream have been measured, and they're noticeably lower in sociopaths and narcissists than in regular people. Oxytocin levels are typically higher in women than in men...but all people have some. And the more you have, scientists are learning, the more concerned you will be about people other than yourself and your own kin. But interestingly, the latest study looked at ways to trigger release of this "moral molecule" into people's brains. Scientists found that simply offering some sign of trust is usually the ticket. In fact, the eccentric scientist who wrote the article said, "I tell everyone who enters my office, 'I'm going to give you a hug you before you leave'." He discovered that a hug can generate a little rush of oxytocin in a person's brain, as can a smile, or a laugh, or a kind word.

I find this study encouraging. It means that there's actually a scientific formula for a better world. It means that trusting people will usually make them want to deserve your trust. It means that showing respect for people will usually make them endeavor to live up to your respect. It means that reaching out in love to the one we hate can actually overcome estrangement, heal the world, cast out fear.

In his book *The Magnificent Defeat*, Frederick Buechner talks about four different kinds of love. He has this to say: "The love for equals is a human thing—of friend for friend, brother for brother. It is to love what is loving and lovely. The world smiles. The love for the less fortunate is a beautiful thing—the love for those who suffer, for those who are poor, the sick, the failures, the unlovely. This is compassion, and it touches the heart of the world. The love for the more fortunate is a rare thing—to love those who succeed where we fail, to rejoice without envy with those who rejoice, the love of the poor for the rich, of the black man for the white man. The world is always bewildered. And then there is the love for the enemy—love for the one who does not love you but mocks, threatens, and inflicts pain. The tortured's love for the torturer. This is God's love. It conquers the world." [End quote] Think how history has proved it. Think how the loving, non-violent resistance of Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr. has proved it. When you love the one who hates you, it makes him feel shame. It makes him want to change. And that is precisely what our world needs, genuine, repentant, soul-searching change!

Imperfect love is easy. Even a rat can do it—as a recent study has proved, when it was discovered that a rat will help a rat-friend out of a trap. Imperfect love has never been enough to heal the world. It's easy to love your own kid, but can you love the kid who bullies her? It's easy to love your own country, but can you love China? It's easy to love your friends and your family (much of the time). But these loves—as good as they are—engender fear, for they make us protective and clingy. Living into perfect love is a lifestyle of training yourself to care about the person you'd like to strangle. At this point in our world's history, at this point in your life, what would it look like to start an oxytocin cycle? What would it look like to strive for perfect love, the kind that casts out fear? Amen.