

Sermon Series: Where the Lover Meets the Road
“The True Love Story”
Sunday, August 7, 2022
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Every body is looking for true love. E.g., back in 1970, over 50 years ago, there came out a movie on true love. It was called “Love Story”, and it was nominated for and won seven Academy Awards, including Best Picture. It was a great romantic story, and a great tragic story, with a great line that still puzzles me, “Love means never having to say you’re sorry”. Nevertheless, it purported to be about true love, in all its brilliance and purity. But ultimately it is a tragedy. Wouldn’t it be nice to have a true love story about true love that ends happily ever after? E.g., the 1987 movie “The Princes’ Bride” was about true love, wasn’t it? And it had a great ending, and Billy Crystal had a wonderful role as a burned-out old wizard. But it was a fictional tale about true love. Again, wouldn’t it be nice to have a true story about true love? In our passage today we find out such does exist!

READ 1 John 4:7-12 (p. 241)

CONTEXT: John has just encouraged the Church to test the spirits, for there are false prophets about. And he says there are those who are of the spirit of truth and the spirit of error, and one can decide who is who by whether the person believes that Jesus came in the flesh. Now John seems to make a sudden shift of subject with an exhortation, perhaps a consequence of following the spirit of truth.

READ vv 7-8a. “John drew the conclusion from the truth that Jesus has come in the flesh — the Church is to love one another, which he emphasizes by using the noun and verb form of the word 15 times in six verses! Not to do this was to reveal they did not know God! Cf. 1 Corinthians 13:1-8a.” If there is anything we can say about John’s first epistle, it is that he is a true pastor. He really loves the people he serves! He continues to address them with terms of endearment, such as “beloved” (e.g. 2:7; 4:1) and little children (e.g., 2:1,12). He *really* cares about his flock! I want to have a pastor’s heart as a pastor, and I know you want to have a pastor’s heart, but it does not always come naturally. There are some pastors I know who are great administrators, even great preachers, but not great pastors. And I think two of the great expressions of a pastor’s heart are: a person of prayer and a person of follow-up. E.g., I recall talking to a pastor of one of the largest UM churches in Louisiana, and I shared with him a personal concern I had in my life as we talked on the phone, and before we got off the phone he said in effect, “Woody, can I pray with you now about this?” He had a pastor’s heart. And the follow-up is important. Have you ever spilled your guts with someone, shared something very personal and involving pain, and in the days to follow the person took initiative to see how you were doing? E.g., last month after we disaffiliated from The UMC and I withdrew, two fellow pastors left messages on my cell phone saying they wanted to talk with me to find out how I was doing. Now, there are different kinds of follow-up, like exhortation. John is

doing some follow-up here in our passage with exhortation, as we see the first person plural imperative, “Let us love one another”. In 3:23 John gave a similar command, “And this is his commandment, that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he commanded us.” Love was foundational in Jesus’ message while He ministered on earth, as seen in His two greatest commandments to love God first and love our neighbor as ourselves (Matthew 22:34-40), and Paul’s profound message on what love is and is not in 1 Corinthians 13:1-8a. And love is intended as an action— we are to help those in need if we have the goods to do so, as we saw in 1 John 3:17. E.g., I recall at my home church where I grew up there was a needy person who had plumbing problems during a freeze in New Orleans and her house was built above the ground, and two of the men in the church knew about plumbing and got under the house and worked on her plumbing and solved her problem. Our love for one another is a natural overflow of our love for the Lord. What John next is to ground this love for one another not in theological or philosophical teaching, but in history.

READ vv 8b-11. “The profound example of this is found in the statement ‘God is love’— where the reverse is not true— which is shown ultimately in the cross. Cf. Romans 5:8.” In Greek grammar the sentence “God is love” cannot be reversed to say “Love is God”, i.e., every expression of what people call love is endorsed by God. E.g., on our vacation in North Carolina Elena and I had a date in downtown Asheville, and I was amazed at many signs in the city promoting love, and I was also amazed at how pagan the city was, with its tarot card readers and a street vendor called “Third Eye” and shops promoting weirdness rather than that which is good. I felt kind of like Paul visiting Athens in Acts 17 where he was distressed to see a city full of idols. Love relationships without God in the center is a bit like drawing two-dimensional stick figures, which look very simple,

as compared to three dimensional drawings with the height, depth, and width—life truly becomes more animated with God. Now, this is not to say that secular people cannot know what love is. I have seen non-believers show great expressions of love for their spouses, and live it out often better than Christians. And this is to be expected. If God is love, and we are made in His image, then of course we would expect believers and non-believers to understand love. To understand love truly is to go to God who made us, who is called in Jeremiah 2:13 “the fountain of living water”. And this is expressed ultimately in a historic event— Jesus’ crucifixion. It is a completely selfless act, where love is not that we first loved God, but He first loved us and sent His Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Romans 5:8 states this well, in a way that always makes me stop and almost lose my breath— that even while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. E.g., I am reminded when I was growing up and I could be spoiled and not very helpful, and when asked to do something I would want to say, “Why?”, as in “How dare you disturb me from watching TV!” Yet my parents loved me unconditionally in those worst of moments— they still fed me, housed me, clothed me. It is extremely touching and wonderful, a love that is not human but divine, and it is humbling. And necessary for a proper understanding of God. I love what Oswald Chambers said for the August 4th devotional in *My Utmost for His Highest*: “The bravery of God in trusting us! You say— ‘But He has been unwise to choose me, because there is nothing in me; I am not of any value.’ That is why He chose you. As long as you think there is something in you, He cannot choose you because you have ends of your own to serve; but if you have let Him bring you to the end of your self-sufficiency then He can choose you to go with Him to Jerusalem, and that will mean the fulfillment of purposes which He does not discuss with you. . . He can do nothing with the man who thinks that he is of use to God. As Christians we are not out for our own cause at all, we are out for the

cause of God, which can never be our cause. . . The main thing about Christianity is not the work we do, but the relationship we maintain and the atmosphere produced by that relationship. That is all God asks us to look after, and it is the one thing that is being continually assailed.”

READ v 12. “John closed the passage boldly by stating two things that the believer’s relationship with God should provide: (1) the world will now be able to see God; (2) God’s love will be perfected in the believer. ‘The love of God displayed in His people is the strongest apologetic that God has in the world’ (F.F. Bruce, *The Epistles of John*, p. 109). Is this true of us?” One day we will see God-- as John emphasized in 3:2, “. . . what we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is”. When Jesus was on earth, people saw God when they saw Him (John 1:18; 14:7). And now the world will know what God looks like when they see believers. So I ask you and me, do our neighbors see God and His love in us? Our co-workers? Our children? Our wives? Our husbands? We need to show people the true love story in Jesus Christ!