

**2018-04-29 Loving Our Phobias**

***Loving Our Phobias***

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[Music Intro]

[Male voice] The following is a presentation of Artisan Church in Rochester, New York.

[Voice of Pastor Scott]

So we are going to be talking a little bit about fear today, so I thought it might be fun if we started out by hearing from some of you the things that you are afraid of. So what are you afraid of? Just shout it right out, be bold in stating your fears.

[Congregant #1]

Snakes

[Pastor Scott]

Snakes! Anybody else? Snakes! Yeah we had Indiana Jones and Shane Bertou and all of you who just raised your hands, you're in good company.

I heard another one here, what was it?

[Congregant #2]

Being alone.

[Pastor Scott]

Being alone. Oh yes, yes, does anyone else feel that way?

[Congregant #3]

Being alone in the dark!

[Pastor Scott]

Being alone in the dark! Yes!

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[Congregant #4]

Being alone in the dark with snakes.

[Laughter]

[Pastor Scott]

Being alone in the dark with snakes! Excellent! I love this place!

Fears take lots of different forms thank you for sharing that with me.

[Congregant #5]

Clowns.

[Pastor Scott]

Clowns! Man, I thought we were almost over that and then the movie came out, and then, man... Well nobody said spiders yet. Spiders? Ok hands up for spiders - I mean not me of course, I'm not afraid of anything but, yeah....

Well, you know, sometimes the things we're afraid of is for good reason, right, it is something that can harm you, or that kind of thing. And then sometimes, do you ever have a fear like this where you aren't even quite sure why you're scared, but you are? And it's important to honor the way you feel about yourself and not shame yourself, but also to think critically about, you know, why is this thing making me feel uncomfortable right now?

Well, we'll come back to fear at the end of the sermon, but for a little bit before we do that I want to go a little different direction. I want to dive right into this passage for today. We're going to be looking at 1 John 4 starting in verse seven. We've been using the book of 1 John all through the season of Eastertide -- I didn't do that on purpose, I mean the lectionary gives us four choices every week and I can usually preach on one or two of them at a time, I didn't intend to do a little study in 1 John, but the passages have been so beautiful to me, they've been so attractive to me, that I've wanted to preach from these each week. Now what we haven't done, I want to point out, is study the book of 1 John, ok, if we were going to study the book of 1 John as a thing we'd want to look at the outline and see how the argumentation flows through and look at all the, you know, contemporary...look you can get really nerdy with that. What we're doing instead is just using these little slices of it that the lectionary serves up each week and studying them one at a time. And there's nothing wrong with using the Bible that

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way, but it may feel like a study in 1 John and I just want to be clear that it's not -- that would be another level of kind of thing. By the way, how many of you have, at some point during this season, read the lectionary passages ahead of time before you came to church on Sunday? See you don't have to be sheepish about that, this happened in the first service too, everyone just kind of went, like, "umm, I'm a Bible nerd", right, but it's ok! We'd love to have you read these texts ahead, we're using the lectionary all year and you can always be studying ahead. It's always great to have those things, kind of, processing in your mind and in your heart before you get here on Sunday.

So, it's been beautiful, and rich, and deep, and I want to dive right in here: 1 John 4:7 "Beloved, let us love one another because love is from God. Everyone who loves is born of God and knows God."

Here's one of the reasons I love 1 John so much: it's because like every single verse, it seems like, is just full and pregnant and you can get so much into this, like pregnant with meaning and depth that's it's, it's incredible! Like every little verse seems like it. And trying to convey the whole Gospel to us in this amazing condensed dense way. "Love one another," he says, "if you love then you're born of God and you know God." Simple right? And we've heard it over and over and over again if you've been here with us during this thing in 1 John you've heard John say this kind of thing again and again. It's very reassuring. "If you love then you know God." But then it seems like every time he says something like that and we start to feel really good and reassured, he follows it up with something else that maybe we don't quite want to hear, and once again he's done it!

Verse eight: "Whoever does not love God does not know God, for God is love."

Uh oh! And once again it sort of feels like John is drawing that line in the sand. We talked about this on the previous week. In saying, listen, if you love people you are on the good side of the line and if you fail to love than you are not on the good side of the line. Have you been loving today, this week, one hundred percent loving? Congratulations you are in! Have you failed to love in every possible way in the past week, or five minutes? Sorry you're out. You gotta go to the back of the line and get yourself back figured out, sorted out until you can come back on this side of it.

But, as I've said at other times when it has seemed like John is drawing that line in the sand, I don't think it's quite what he's doing to try to tell some people that are in and some people that are out. I think, instead, instead of using this line to shame some people or exclude them, what he's doing is actually calling people, in fact calling all of us, to something better, something deeper, something higher, something more. Because whatever side of that line you might be

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on, if it was there, as it starkly feels sometimes it is, we can all do more, we can all know God more by loving people and loving God better. He's basically telling us something that we already know, which is that when we love, we move closer to God. And when we fail to love, it's like we're backing away from God, we're moving farther away. Note, by the way, that God's position doesn't change in that scenario. God doesn't move away from us when we sin, it's we who move away from God in our own sin. And as a matter of fact, God relentlessly pursues us with God's love and forgiveness.

Wouldn't it be great if all of us always used Scriptural truth in the way that I think John is using it here?! In other words, if we use Scriptural truths to point out to each other gently and lovingly the times when we see each other moving away from God. Telling somebody that you are in a trusting communal relationship with, that you know is trying to do what's right, is trying to love God well and love people well, telling that person, "you know what, I've known you a long time now, and it seems to me you're slipping right now." That's one thing, that would be the type of calling that I think we are seeing in this verse in 1 John. Couldn't it be, wouldn't be amazing if we all did that rather than trying to use that same text of the Bible to draw lines around our in-group so that we can then remind everybody how inconvenient for them it is that they are outside the circle. And, by the way, when you see Christians and all religious people doing that, the goal isn't so much to exclude, although sometimes there's a very harsh nature to this kind of thing, it's, I think, more often rooted in a desire to include themselves -- you can very easily define yourself as "in" by defining other people as "out". And it would be quite simple to use a text like this to do that, but I don't think that's what John wants us to do, I don't think that that's what he means

So, let's go on. Verse nine: "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."

So, here is more of what we have heard so many times over the past month or so from John: the cross is the perfect revelation of God's love and Jesus Christ is our Savior, who sacrificed himself for our sake, and he is our model for how we ought to love other people sacrificially. It's not, that's not new, right, if you've been reading these texts, you've seen versions of this come out again and again and again. And why is that the case? Well, because this is the only way that some people will ever have a chance to see God. That's what he goes on to say.

Read verse twelve: "No one has ever seen God. If we love one another God lives in us and His love is perfected in us. By this we know that we abide in Him and He in us, because he has given

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us of His Spirit and we have seen and do testify that the Father has sent His Son as the savior of the world. God abides in those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God and they abide in God. So we have known and believe the love that God has for us. God is love and those who abide in love abide in God and God abides in them.”

So, if you want to testify to somebody about God, if you want to tell somebody about God, the way you do that is by loving them -- you testify to God by your actions. We've heard that before too, haven't we. Because God *is* love, whenever you show someone love you are showing them God. That is, yes, an enormous responsibility, but it's also kind of reassuring, isn't it, that you don't have to have some theological treatise prepared to share the gospel with someone, to show God to someone, you can do that simply by loving them.

And now here the passage is going to take a little bit of a turn. And I think it's going to go into some new territory that unlike much of what I've just shared with you is not, is something that's a little bit new, something that John hasn't really touched on so far in the passages from this book that we've seen over the last few weeks. Let's start by looking at verse seventeen.

“Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness on the day of judgment. Because as he is, so are we in this world. There is no fear in love but perfect love casts out fear, for fear has to do with punishment and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love.”

“We may have boldness on the day of judgment...” Those of you who've been around the block a little bit, think, think on it with me this way: when you have heard somebody sharing the gospel with other people and using, specifically using, the “Day of Judgment” as part of that message, how does that usually come across? Does it usually include the words: “you may have boldness on the Day of Judgment”? No, that makes for a very terrible cartoon, right? It's easy to make fun of those little cartoon tracks, right? But all the talk of the Day of Judgment is about fear and destruction and punishment. And I don't know if the people who drew those cartoons have read this verse of the Bible, but if they read 1 John 4:17-18. “We may have boldness on the Day of Judgment!” “There is no fear in love!” “Perfect love casts out fear!” Fear has to do with punishment and we've seen love perfected among us. Now we haven't seen it quite as recently and maybe viscerally as this John and his readers had seen it, but on the cross Jesus Christ perfectly reveals God's love for humanity and, because of that, we don't need to be afraid of judgment, he says, in fact, we can have boldness on the Judgment Day. That's a beautiful picture! That's a gospel I would be excited to share with friends! “Because perfect love casts out fear.”

And if you're afraid of God's punishment, John seems to be saying, it's a sign not that you're a hopeless sinner, although surely each one of us is, but rather of the fact that you haven't

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reached perfection in love yet. Hands up if you haven't reached perfection in love yet! You know and every hand goes up! Yeah, right... And so you might have a fear of judgment day. That's a sign you haven't reached perfection in love yet. It's not a sign of how terrible you are. So, a holy, reverent, respectful fear of God -- and yes the bible uses that kind of language a lot -- that's something that ought to lead us toward love of God and love of neighbor, not something that should make us feel terrified of what God is going to do with us, as if all of those texts in the Bible are saying to us, "you just wait until your father gets home!"

But I actually want to turn back to the idea of loving one another, and I want to connect that idea to all this talk about fear, does that makes sense? Of course I'd want to connect loving each other to the idea of fear, it's natural. Here's the thing, I think the fact that we are so scared of God's judgment, sometimes, some of us, that is certainly problematic, but I think it's only part of the problem. I think we are also scared of each other and I think our fear of each other is one of the things that causes us to fail in love. Which, of course makes us susceptible to the fear of judgment. The unfortunate truth is we could take our key verse today, "perfect love casts out fear," and we could flip it around and say, "perfect fear casts out love" and it would still be true.

So, I titled today's message "Loving our Phobias," and that's not because I want you to love snakes, or the dark, or spiders, or spirits that knock remote controls off the wall. Loving our phobias, I don't mean that you have to love the stuff that makes you legitimately scared or creeped out. You don't need to have joy skipping through the haunted house, that's not really where I'm going with this. What I want you to hear instead is this: I want you to love other people that you find it very difficult to love, and specifically the people you find it difficult to love because they are so different from you. Or different from your expectations of what a lovable person looks like, or acts like. Or different from what the church may tell you makes somebody worthy or lovable. I'm thinking of phobias of other human beings. Phobias that could be defined probably more like that mixture of revulsion and apprehension that you feel sometimes when you are in the presence of somebody else who is the divine image bearer, but doesn't quite make sense to you.

Now, I need to take a quick aside here. I'm going to come right back to that point but, unfortunately there was somebody in the news this week, a fairly prominent Christian leader, who said something that I need to condemn. And I try not to spend too much of my time condemning what other people say, but what this person said was that specifically that women who are being abused by their husbands should stay in that relationship and just love their husbands better and pray for them more and that that's the right solution in that situation. And I cannot possibly condemn that idea strongly enough. I just have to, I want to throw that completely out. I've said this kind of thing once or twice before. It bears repeating that if you

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are a person who's being harmed by someone in your family or someone who's your partner, you are not violating, you know, the biblical ideals of marriage and divorce to get out of that situation. And in fact I think you should, because the likelihood that something is going to change in that situation is very low and you need to do what you should do to protect yourself and especially to protect children. And yes the Bible calls us, Jesus teaches us, to love everyone, even our enemies, but this kind of love maybe would be better expressed at a distance. And so I think it's terribly unfortunate that that teaching got pushed out this week and if you didn't see it, God bless you, but I know that some of you did, and I can't let that thing just go by. And so I want you also to know that our church is a safe place to come and seek care in those situations and that we will walk with you through that and not shame you. And we're not going to send you back to your husband, I mean let's be honest that's usually how it works out, it sometimes very very rarely goes the other way and I'll talk to you too. But, if you're afraid of speaking out about some like that because you're worried that the church specifically is going to send you back into a dangerous situation, know that that is not how we will respond to you in those situations.

The point being, I'm not talking about loving your phobias meaning if someone is causing you to be terrified because of the risk of physical harm that you should just love them. Ok. I don't want there to be any confusion about that. What I'm talking about is things like homophobia and transphobia and xenophobia and ableism and all the things that cause us to see people who are different from us as somehow dangerous and repulsive. I'm talking about the fear and distrust of that which is perceived to be foreign or strange. If it sounds like I'm reading that from Wikipedia, that's because I am. Wikipedia has an excellent article on xenophobia and I commend it to you. Xenophobia manifests itself in the perceptions of an in-group toward an outgroup. Remember those lines? Xenophobia, it manifests itself in a fear of losing identity, in a suspicion of another group's activities, in aggression toward that group and a desire to eliminate its presence to secure a presumed purity. If all of that sounds painfully, disgustingly familiar right now it's because it's running rampant in our culture and in the church and I believe the love of Christ compels us to eradicate that kind of fear from our own lives. To eradicate that communal fear from our churches. And, yes, because we are called to bring the kingdom of God to bear in the systems that we live in, to eradicate that kind of fear from the broader public sphere as people who are prophets, and witnesses, and ambassadors for the Kingdom of God, made real to us through His Son Jesus Christ. It is imperative that we erase that phobic posture from our lives. "Perfect fear casts out love" and if we're consumed by, or overwhelmed by, or even still influenced by xenophobia or all these other phobias of human beings, we will not be able to know God's love fully and we certainly won't be able to testify to God's love with our actions toward other people. But, the good news is that perfect love casts

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out fear and if we become consumed, rather, by Christ's love, then we will naturally, if somewhat slowly, more slowly than we might wish, we will begin to overcome those fears, not just our fear of divine judgment, but also our fear of people who are different from us.

Now, I suspect that some of you have been rolling your eyes at me just a little bit over the last few minutes, maybe the eyes, maybe the inner eye. Maybe you haven't wanted to show me the eye roll, but there's a little bit of an eye roll that comes out, sometimes. Maybe you've been wondering if this turn I took a few minutes ago toward loving our phobias is just another example of somebody taking the Bible and stretching it out to cover up their own beliefs and to say the Bible says this because I want to say this. Or maybe you've been worried that I'm making the Bible say what I want to say, or taking my personal views and extending it past the Bible and not submitting to the Bible, or committing that most grievous sin of all, which is, like, giving into modern culture. And listen, I've sat in a lot of sermons and rolled my eyes, I don't take that personally at all. But, sometimes when I started out rolling my eyes, I actually end up learning something and it would be good, very humbling to me if that were the case today. But to people who might be wanting to challenge what I've just said as being over-political or over-culturally indicated, any of those things, I have two responses to that. And lucky for you and lucky for me the responses come from the Bible.

The first response is actually the whole last reading from the lectionary that we didn't get to today. It's from Acts 8 and I don't have time to even read it to you, it's a long reading. It's one of the most beautiful stories in all of Scripture. I love this text and I wish I could have preached this sermon and the sermon that I gave on... **\*\*reviews notes\*\*** September 20, 2015... For those of you who want to find it on the podcast, I preached a sermon on this text, which I think was pretty good. I don't want to sound like overly self congratulatory, but it's one of my favorite sermons that I ever wrote. This story in Acts 8 is about how one of the church's early leaders demonstrated perfect love to someone who fit into nearly every category of person-phobia that we could imagine. It's fair to say, actually, that this is a story of perfect love casting out what might have been fear, instead. The person in question is an Ethiopian eunuch, someone who Robert Greer rightly describes as "a sexually other devout person from Africa". Now, depending on what cultural waters you swim in, that might be three strikes and you're out right there. It certainly was a lot for Philip to overcome. And man do I wish I could preach a whole other sermon on that right now, it's really an amazing story! But all I can do is commend it to you. Read the passage on your own and ask the Spirit to show you what you might need to see in that story.

But, the second response to my eye-rolling friends also comes from scripture. And, as a matter of fact, it comes from the very passage that we've already been studying today, the passage

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from 1 John 4. See, I held out on you a little bit, I sandbagged it just a little bit, I didn't read the last three verses of that text. So, if you are thinking that "oh man he made a real big stretch for all this love stuff about divine judgment and all the way into that. What was all that xenophobia stuff? Like that's a different world" Well, what I can do is read to you these last three verses and if you have any doubts that the love of Christ is given to us so that we can overcome our fears of other people maybe this will help assuage those doubts. Chapter 4 verses 19-21, and I will close with these words.

"We love because He first loved us. Those who say I love God and hate their brothers or sisters are liars. For those who do not love a brother or sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from him is this, those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also."

Please join me in prayer.

God we find so much beauty and meaning in these words from the Epistle of 1 John. We give you thanks for the way your Spirit inspired it, for the way the church retained it and transmitted it to us so that we could read it today. And we give you thanks for the challenge that is contained within it, a challenge to allow your perfect love to cast out our fears -- our fears of you, our fears of each other. We pray that the same Spirit who inspired these words would inspire us to make them into a reality in our world, to eradicate the phobias that dominate us, that control us, that prevent us from bringing your gospel to its full meaning in our society. Give us wisdom in how to do that, courage to do it well, and the grace to forgive ourselves and each other when we fall short. We pray these things in the name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

Our communion table will now be opened and open for the remainder of our service. Artisan offers an open table meaning you don't have to be a member of our church to partake of this blessed sacrament, you simply have to be following Jesus and seeking to live his way in this world. So, I invite you all, if you'd like to come, to come and receive the body and blood of the Savior. Take a piece of the bread, remember his body, which is broken for you. And dip it in one of the cups -- we have wine or juice -- remember his blood, which is shed for the forgiveness of sins. May it be for you the real presence of Jesus, today. May it be spiritual food for your hungry and tired souls and may it be an act of unity with each other, even across the cultural, and political, and economic, and racial, and all kinds of other divides that are present whenever we gather. May we be in communion with each other at this table. Also, a member the prayer team will be at the back of the room and would be happy to pray with you, if you like to receive prayer today. And your children are invited to take communion with you, and you can take it

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before you get them, and then get them as well, if you prefer to do it that way. But continue to worship God at the table, in prayer, and in song, as the Spirit leads, I encourage you to respond. Amen.

[end of sermon]

[Male voice] For more information visit us at [ArtisanChurch.com](http://ArtisanChurch.com)