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St. Thomas Evangelical Lutheran Church, Bloomington, Indiana

Series: Love: the Cure for Indifference
Poor Lovers

1 John 1:1—2:2

We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life—this life was revealed, and we have seen it and testify to it, and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us—we declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have communion with us; and truly our communion is with the Father and with Jesus Christ, the Son. We are writing these things so that our joy may be complete.

This is the message we have heard from Jesus Christ and proclaim to you, that God is light and in God there is no darkness at all. If we say that we have communion with God while we are walking in darkness, we lie and do not do what is true; but if we walk in the light as God is in the light, we have communion with one another, and the blood of Jesus, God's Son, cleanses us from all sin. If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say that we have not sinned, we make God a liar, and God's word is not in us.

My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous, who is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.

One thing you rarely see on television is forgiveness. We get a front row seat to our culture's musing on what it is to be in a relationship and to screw it up, but so rarely do we have a front row seat to forgiveness. Revenge, sure. And, sometimes, some kind of "let's let bygones be bygones" pseudo-forgiveness that stands until the writers run out of plot-twist fodder and just bring it up again. I complained about the lack of pop culture examples of forgiveness and my preaching professor pointed me to the first song I ever bought on iTunes: Don Henley's "The Heart of the Matter." The song, to my knowledge, doesn't have some amazing backstory, just something Henley claims he'd wanted to write for a while. The chorus of the song changes a bit with each reprise, but it essentially says,

*I'm trying to get down
to the heart of the matter
but my will gets weak
and my thoughts seem to scatter*

*But I think it's about forgiveness
forgiveness
even if you don't love me anymore.*

It is an odd love song - though I'm not sure it is about romantic love. It reminds us of something I think we know is true, but see so rarely -- that to love is to forgive. To forgive is to love. And, of course, that is the message of the cross.

In the face of the cross, we must begin by the confessing a simple truth: we are bad at forgiveness because we are really, really bad at love. Now, this is the first of a series of sermons on First John and on the topic of Love. I thought about calling the series "All About Love" and riffing on the end of Rent's Seasons of Love, but I'm not sure I could hold up to the "all" promised there. I thought about the Beatle's "All you Need is Love," but I'm wary of that "all," too - love may be the greatest, but St. Paul did say that faith and hope also abide. Instead, I'm going to adopt the great academic mantle of a colon, calling the series, "Love: the Cure for Indifference." Because, I think, the place where we are the worst at love and forgiveness is where we exercise the greatest privilege of all: indifference. Elie Wiesel once said,

The opposite of love is not hate, it's indifference.
The opposite of art is not ugliness, it's indifference.
The opposite of faith is not heresy, it's indifference.
And the opposite of life is not death, it's indifference.

To love is to forgive. And we love poorly, beloved.

We love poorly, beloved, because we are so privileged. We hear the word privileged a lot when we are learning to wake up to our and our society's racism. Actually, beloved, let me begin by confessing that I am still waking up to my own racism, and while I'm going to attempt to explain this, I pray you'll forgive me if I get out over my own skis here. So, privilege is the constellation of advantages that some people have and take for granted. These advantages are unearned or inherited, and they are not distributed equally. When I think about my privilege as a straight, white, cis-gendered person, I think one of the greatest privileges I ever exercise is when I can stop thinking about race or sexuality or gender. When I can stop thinking about that horrible thing that just happened and think about, hmmm, when did I last eat mashed potatoes and move on with my day. My siblings in Christ who are not straight, white, and cis-gendered don't have that luxury. Even if they move on to mashed potatoes, that big thing will still be there, like a dark cloud that never leaves. We love poorly, beloved, because we can numb ourselves to the brokenness of the world while falsely claiming our own wholeness, as if we could be whole when our sibling in Christ is hurting.

We love poorly, beloved, because we take up our favorite position, luxuriating on the self-righteous shore of certainty where we watch others drown in our assumptions and judgments and prejudices.

We love poorly, beloved, because at every chance, we default to our own self interest and come up short when it comes to offering the fullness of our love to others.

We love poorly, beloved, because we let our love of the hated be our excuse to hate the hater while enjoying the privilege of being neither hated nor hater.

We love poorly, beloved, because, like Thomas, we demand knowledge and hang our empathy on the hook of “understanding.” It is like we’ve given knowledge the wheel and let it drive over every chance at truly being empathetic to the lives and circumstances of others.

We love poorly, beloved, whenever we are indifferent to pain or grief or brokenness or cruelty.

The members of community in First John loved poorly, too. As best we can tell, the community was in crisis, dividing over what we think is the heretical doctrine of docetism. Docetism believed that Jesus only *seemed* to be fully human. Docetists believed that the flesh was totally and completely evil. So the Christ couldn’t possibly take on flesh. We call it a heresy because if Jesus Christ only seemed to be human, then there was no death on the cross, and if there was no death, then there was no resurrection. And that’s the heart of the crisis: a disagreement over doctrine. And it matters. I think I’ll borrow Dorothy Day’s words to explain why: “Love must be incarnate.” Love has to be really real. For the writer of First John, we call this person, by the way, “The Elder” — for the Elder, the solution to the crisis is also the right answer: it matters greatly that Jesus took on our flesh and blood. It matters that his was willing to take on that which we so often attribute to sin. It matters that the more profound statement of his love was forgiveness.

When the Elder writes to this community, he doesn’t issue a polemic against the docetists, but a call to fellowship and unity and love around the very real person of Jesus Christ, around the incarnate love of God. And the prologue to his letter is about sin and God’s forgiveness. From the very beginning, the Elder lowers the temperature on the conflict by making it clear that conflict and sin are a way of life in community. He says, “If we say we have no sin, the only person we deceive is ourselves.” Conflict, even sin, is something we should expect and not fear. The love we have isn’t based in “always getting along.” The love we have isn’t based on agreeing on everything. The love we have isn’t based on being without sin or ugliness or doubt or fear. The love we have isn’t based in never loving poorly. The love we have - what sets us and our communities free - is the truth that another word for love is forgiveness.

That’s what Henri Nouwen says: “Forgiveness is the name of love practiced among people who love poorly. The hard truth is that all people love poorly. We need to forgive and be forgiven every day, every hour increasingly. That is the great work of love among the fellowship of the weak that is the human family.” Now we’re not talking about doormat

forgiveness. Where we just pretend like nothing ever happens; where we get hurt again and again. No, we're talking about the kind of forgiveness that we see in the cross, the kind of forgiveness that transforms victim and perpetrator into completely new people. The kind of forgiveness that is love incarnate.

And so, beloved, we may love poorly, and that may very well be our lot in life. But we can also be forgivers. Dag Hammarskjöld, the first UN secretary general, wrote about forgiveness in his journals, which were compiled into the book *Markings*. He noted that forgiveness is a sacrifice because the forgiver, "takes...the consequences of what you have done." And so, there is price to forgiveness, and Hammarskjöld says it is, "The price you must pay for your own liberation through another's sacrifice is that you in turn must be willing to liberate in the same way, irrespective of the consequences to yourself." You take the time and energy to hold open the door that was held open for you.

So we return to our abbreviated list of all the ways we love poorly. How can we be transformed? We can wake up to and be curious about the lives and circumstances of others. We can suspend judgement. We can condemn hatred and work for the liberation of the hated and the transformation of the hater. We can refuse to remain neutral. We can use our voice and use our silence. We can be transformed by turning our forgiveness into more forgiveness. The love of God into more love. That is the work that God intends to do in us, every hour increasingly.

Amen.