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St. Thomas Lutheran Church, Bloomington, Indiana

Series: Love: the Cure for Indifference
Transformative Love

1 John 3:1-7

See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are. The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know God. Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when it is revealed, we will be like God, for we will see God as God is. And all who have this hope in God purify themselves, just as the Son is pure. Everyone who commits sin is guilty of lawlessness; sin is lawlessness. You know that Christ was revealed to take away sins, and in him there is no sin. No one who abides in the Son sins; no one who sins has either seen or known the Son. Little children, let no one deceive you. Everyone who does what is right is righteous, just as Christ is righteous.

When I was a true, newbie pastor - you know, yesterday (wink) - a group of five or six local Lutheran pastors would gather for the kind of coffee that could hold up your spoon and rot your gut, a plate of eggs, and the smell of grease in your hair for the rest of the day. And, of course, great conversation. Most weeks, Pr. Norm Nordman held court. A true saint, who entered the Church Triumphant, many years ago, Norm's faithful answer to God's call ended only a few miles where it began, on the farm where he'd been born and raised. But that call also took him around the world, and he served as a missionary for over a decade in Papua New Guinea. He told of us the extensive training in medical care and midwifery he received, far overshadowing the actual training in evangelism. He told us stories of the people he met. With his wisdom, he answered all my novice questions. Once, when I asked him about baptizing a baby whose family did not attend church, Norm had a haunting answer. He told of watching the trial of a murderer in Papua New Guinea. For some reason, the judge, astonished at the brutality of the crime, asked the man if he had been baptized. The response was shocking: it was *because* he baptized that he felt he could whatever he wanted, "The preacher, he dipped me, didn't he?"

To this day, I still think the church should be exceedingly generous of the means of grace - whenever someone presents themselves for baptism, we should trust the grace of God, and not our own, bound will. But Pr. Norm's story still haunts me, because I've seen it myself: people so sure that their baptism allows them to do just about anything. We love to say that God loves you *just as you are*, and this is most certainly true. Perfection is not a prerequisite for the love God. God really does love you, especially when you're at your lowest. God's love for the least is one of the greatest themes of scripture. But God's love doesn't leave us there. God's love transforms us. God loves us into the future.

Last week, we were introduced to the community that received the original letter we call First John. Now, despite the title, it is unlikely that this letter was written by John the Evangelist who wrote the Gospel of John. And just for the record there are some other Johns that ought to be separated from one another as well: John the disciple, John the Baptist, John of Patmos who likely wrote the biblical book of Revelation, and, of course, any of the 23 popes who have taken the name of John. I doubt any of us would confuse them with the writer of John, but I include them for clarity's sake. None of those people are likely the writer of this letter, so we call this writer "The Elder." And the Elder's community has been factionalizing. First, he tells them, conflict doesn't need to be a threat to their community, not because they're so amazingly faithful that they'll never have conflict, but that conflict is a part of community. Same as sin and brokenness. More than conflict, what matters most is how we respond to conflict: with forgiveness. Of course, a never-ending cycle of sinning and forgiveness sounds exhausting. Aren't I ever going to get better? Aren't any of us? And the Elder responds, "We do not yet know what we will be, but we know that - whatever we will be - God's transforming love will carry us into the future." God loves us into the future.

This isn't too far from what Luther says about the Christian life: "This life therefore is not righteousness, but growth in righteousness, not health, but healing, not being but becoming, not rest but exercise. We are not yet what we shall be, but we are growing toward it, the process is not yet finished, but it is going on, this is not the end, but it is the road. All does not yet gleam in glory, but all is being purified." To be a Christian is to live a life that is constantly transforming into a more Christ-like one. This is what happens when one is loved by God: we are transformed. The Elder writes, "Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is."

Let's be clear: *God transforms us.*

This isn't some expectation that we will transform ourselves. You see? We like to try that trick, thinking we can change ourselves, thinking we can be the author of our own salvation. But the truth is every yardstick of supposed "transformation" we make - we call it, say, morality, sanctification, righteousness, holiness - whatever yardstick humanity has ever created, we've promptly turned into a club to bludgeon one another. Look, it isn't up to us to manufacture our own transformations. It isn't up to us to write the standards for holiness or righteousness or goodness. You don't need to write your own rules. I just finished a great book by a British woman named Anna McNuff about her adventure running the 3000 kilometer Te Araroa trail in New Zealand. The book is titled *The Pants of Perspective* for the ridiculous leggings she wore when she badly injured her ankle on the trail and continued anyway. The Te Araroa is a lot like the Appalachian Trail—people try to through-hike it—and there are northbounders and southbounders, whose start depends on the time of year. Early on her northbound trip, McNuff runs into a couple of southbounders who have their own trail rules—in this case, they only ate food they foraged from the trail. The pair try to convince McNuff that this should be everyone's rules, but she, in her

characteristic way, just shrugs it off, explaining to the reader that that is the way of the trail, everyone has their rules: you can respect them but you don't have to make their rules your rules. Hiking—or in McNuff's case, running—3000 wild kilometers will transform you regardless of the rules you set for yourself or hope others will follow. That's a true lesson of the Christian life. You need only be the beloved of God to be transformed.

Trusting God's love doesn't give us carte blanche to abuse one another. Knowing that conflict is a way of life, and forgiveness is the name of love among the community called the church, and knowing that God's love and not some human-created yardstick is the source of our transformation, none of this gives us the right to pick fights, and run over one another, and hurt one another. We cannot be cavalier and indifferent with our lives — we cannot be cavalier and indifferent with our neighbor's lives — because God refuses to be cavalier and indifferent with our lives. God takes our transformation very seriously. But God's seriousness is borne out in love —ultimate love, self-sacrificing love, cross-shaped love.

Perhaps this seems too easy. Just let the love of God transform your life. But, into what? The best we can assume is that we are being transformed into a more Christ-like existence. It is almost laughable when the Elder tells us to purify ourselves as God is pure. Because who among us would do so willingly? Would we not actually exhaust every other option first? But this is the future we are being loved into. We are being transformed, purified, formed into a more Christ-like shape. So that, when we reach those refining fires or that great forge or whatever method of purification we must undergo - here I think of St. Paul's terrifyingly epic list in Romans 8: hardship, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, peril, sword. We are being loved into a future that *whatever* makes us more Christ-like, we will approach it knowing our beloved, God's own self, is with us and is the author and creator of whatever is yet to come.

Amen.