

**Sacred Readings** 1 John 4:7-21 and John 15:1-8**1 John 4:7-21**

4:7 Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God.

4:8 Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love.

4:9 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.

4:10 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.

4:11 Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another.

4:12 No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.

4:13 By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit.

4:14 And we have seen and do testify that the Father has sent his Son as the Savior of the world.

4:15 God abides in those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God, and they abide in God.

4:16 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.

4:17 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.

4:18 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.

4:19 We love because he first loved us.

4:20 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.

4:21 The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.

**John 15:1-8**

15:1 "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower.

15:2 He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit.

15:3 You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you.

15:4 Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me.

15:5 I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing.

15:6 Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned.

15:7 If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.

15:8 My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.

## **Reflection on 1 John 4:7-21**

I was watching my son the other day, he came to stand in front of a mirror that was the right height just for him. All the mirrors in our apartment are for us grownups, I have to hold Hugo up for him to see himself, and of course he sees me too, or his mom if she is the one holding him. But not so with this mirror we came across. He could walk up to it himself and see himself and only himself. And he was tickled!

Babies love mirrors. It must be kind of a magical thing to see yourself those first times. For whatever reason, this tends to change when we get to be more self-conscious. The mirror loses its charm and its mystery. Maybe occasionally we are as pleased with what we see. We actually should try to see ourselves with the same love and sweetness, I think, that babies do. But, that's a hard thing to do for many of us. There are real obstacles, there are things that get put between our eyes and our true selves.

Anyway, for Hugo the mirror has not lost its magic, not yet. I sat down near him and just watched. At first he smiled widely at himself. Then he sort of turned his head this way and that, and then tried on some different expressions. Finally he reached out to the mirror with a clenched fist and tapped his knuckles against it. When he saw himself do the same back to him, he giggled. He pulled his hand back and then thrust it forward again to the mirror. Then he reached out with his other hand, with his index finger, pressing it to the mirror. He did this repeatedly. He seemed to race his reflection, to see who could touch the mirror first.

Finally he just sort of went still and quiet and he just gazed lovingly at himself (as if to say): ‘there I am’.

In this first letter of his, John says that God loved us before we loved God. That the establishment of love, the possibility of a life *in* love, proceeds from God first. God’s love then moves us to love God back. And if we are to love God back, we have to look in the mirror like our children. We have to love who we see looking back

at us, and we have to love everyone else who we see. Because we cannot see God. Throughout this passage, he is trying to convince his audience of this, that if their goal is to be faithful, to be believers, to love God, they must love one another. I love this verse here that if you say you love God but you do not love your brothers and sisters, then you are a liar. This gives us a kind of litmus test for true belief in God.

Clearly John faced a challenge of addressing a community that claimed to be religious, but was not actually living up to its faith. In my religious life, I have felt the opposite challenge. I have an easy and constant belief in the people I see. Ministering at this church, how could I not? But at times in my life, this belief in the love that people have, that I am certain we are all capable of, has not been connected to God necessarily.

And, since I can't see God, but I can see you, and I can see my coworkers, my classmates, my friends, my family, I have at times not felt like God was all that important. It is a nice idea to believe in God, but if I'm so filled with belief in you, and in myself also—if,

without ever coming to God—I have all the belief in love I need, why go any further? Why try to see what can *never* be seen, what does that add to my belief, why would that matter at all? Why “get religion”, why become “spiritual”, why not just “get ecological,” why not “get scientific” about it, really scientific, and *actually* see, with scientific instruments, how we *are* as a matter of *fact* truly connected and interdependent? Because we have to sometimes wonder, does this God idea really help, or does it actually hinder human unity?

Isn't John right, that if you say you love God but do not love your human siblings you are really a liar?

On the other hand, if you love your human siblings but you say you don't love God, are you also a liar?

And in any case, which would be worse? I think that answer is clear, we can *see* that answer, because we can see each other.

Loving God but not your fellow humans is a vicious lie, a harmful

one, a community- and an earth-destroying lie. It's a lie told everyday in this country and in this world, and we all suffer for it.

But loving your fellow humans and saying you do not also love God, that is either not a lie at all or it's a little white lie, it's certainly not going to hurt anyone. I suppose, even as I now consider myself a believer in God, if I could wave my hand and turn the whole world into great believers in humanity but not believers in God, I might consider that. Just as a practical matter, that might be the way to go. I'd certainly be tempted.

But then I think about Hugo, and why his first glimpses of himself delight him so much. They probably delight him for unconsidered, unconscious reasons. But I know why. He is getting to see who I see, who his mother sees, who his grandparents and other people see. People he has love for. People whose love he feels and trusts in. He is seeing the child who has his own life *in* the love of all the people he sees.

Not everyone experiences that kind of love from other people. And many more, who once experienced it, who once felt it and



trusted in it, come to lose track of it. They lose it *or* are denied the love of others, and their reflection becomes remote to them. Their true self drifts away from them.

We *all* deal with some of this. Probably *none* of us are as delighted and moved by our beautiful reflections as we were at Hugo's age. That is because we all live in this competitive and judgmental and harsh world. No matter how much those closest to us have loved us and still love us, the world around us can chip away at our self-love and at our self-belief. In fact, I think this is the norm, although obviously our chemistry and our bodies and our circumstances, our stressors, on and on, can mean this loss is a little loss or a total loss, a little struggle or an impossible one. And our whole culture, adding insult to injury, makes tending to our mental health very difficult. There are still powerful, devastating taboos that can leave us feeling totally alone, and that can drive us into shame and guilt. We can even become entirely unmoored from ourselves. It is not only that the mirror has lost its charm. It has actually lost its function. We may no longer see our reflection,

ourselves; we may see nothing at all. Or we may see only what the world has put onto us, what it has ascribed to us, and our eyes, just like John is teaching, they can only see what is there, after all, or what it perceives is there; they are not as good at discerning, on their own, what is there truly versus what is there artificially, or superficially. The mirror and our eyes and what we can see can become a kind of trick and a kind of menace.

Hmm, and then I think God is very important.

Because in the deepest, darkest valley, in the very shadow of death, God loves us before we love God, and before we love ourselves and before we love anyone else. God matters because God actually *is* love, and God is love especially when love is being denied and hidden away and disfigured.

And God, who cannot be seen, is impervious to these distortions. God stays love no matter what has been put between our eyes and the truth. And God will always delight in *our* image, even if we cannot see God looking at us. In our most wretched moments,

at our most despairing hours, God loves us unconditionally and totally, and will never let us out of God's loving sight. We are always the apple in God's eye, the absolute spark for God's own being and all creation; and all existence *is* generated and animated by the love God has especially for those who are unloved by humanity, who have become hopeless of seeing and feeling love ever again.

And that God who is love once had a human Son. And that human Son was like a new or perhaps the first true human, who went all the way to the cross to prove the power and the courage of love, which overcomes violence, which overcomes cruelty and bullying, which overcomes alienation and humiliation and being ostracized and denied. Overcomes death itself and all those who wield death to break you of *your* love.

And in this sense, I come to love this other verse even, one that rightly makes many of us uneasy, the one that says, 'yes!, yes Jesus did come to atone for our sins:' meaning, our sin of blocking the right that all people have to be loved on this earth just as in

heaven. Jesus made us like brothers and sisters, because God so loved him. He made us like brothers and sisters, because he so loved God.

The world can hurt us but it can not break us.

It can chip away at our love for ourselves and for humanity, but it will not triumph.

Because we are an Easter people, a beautiful people.

May our reflections delight us now and always, whatever may come. And in God's holy image,

Alleluia and amen.