

Emmanuel Ev. Lutheran Church—Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod

Easter 6

May 9, 2021 (Mother's Day)

Sermon by Pastor Jon D. Buchholz

This is love

—1 John 4:7-11

What is love? That's a question that poets, playwrights and philosophers have asked for centuries. Since the Bible is itself a love story, it is full of examples of what love looks like. During this Easter season we've seen some beautiful pictures of God's love. We've seen the love of a shepherd for his sheep, and especially the love of the Good Shepherd, who lays down his life for the sheep, only to take it up again. We've seen the tender love of our heavenly Father that has brought us into his family: how great is the love the Father has lavished on us that we should be called children of God! Since today is Mother's Day, we can think of the pictures Scripture paints for us of the love between a mother and her child. In the Old Testament the Prophet Isaiah spoke the word of the LORD: "Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne?" (Isaiah 49:15). The close bond between mother and child develops over nine months as the baby grows in her womb. Can there be any closer earthly bond? The LORD continues through Isaiah, "As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you" (Isaiah 66:13), a picture of a mother's love cradling her child in her arms, speaking words of comfort, wiping away a child's tears. What a beautiful love we experience and celebrate today on Mother's Day, the bond of love between mother and child!

And yet, a mother's love for her child, as close and deep and personal as that may be, is still only a dim reflection of God's love for us. God gives us these beautiful loving relationships to cherish and to celebrate on earth to remind us that *everything* that has to do with love is from him. God is the source of all love. God is love. All the love we experience anywhere on earth is a dim reflection, just a sweet little taste, just a tiny glimpse of the infinite love God has for you. St. John tells us, "*Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love.*" This Easter season we've cherished the fact that we've been raised to life with Jesus our resurrected Savior. We have been raised from death in sin to a new life with Christ. The new life we live is a life of love. Love comes from Jesus. In Jesus, we love one another. In Jesus we are confident and secure in God's love.

In our earthly relationships we love one another, but the love we show and the love we share is not the standard for what love is. We love, but sometimes we love conditionally; we love and show love to those who love and show love to us in return. For us, love can become a weapon, and we have withheld love from people who have angered and wronged us. We have dredged up the sins of the past instead of showing love that keeps no record of wrongs. Instead of loving one another as Jesus teaches us, with a love that comes from God, we have lashed out in anger, spoken words that cut and hurt, and been unloving in our dealings with one another. It's not just the unknown stranger in the next car over who has been the object of our loveless rage. Sometimes it's the people that we say we love, the ones who are closest to us, who are hurt most by our unloving words and actions. And that's in our dealings with one another, people who are right with us, people whom we can see—our neighbors, our brothers and sisters in the church, our family members at home.

How have we loved God, whom we have not seen? Any of us would say, "I love God!" Wouldn't you? If I were to ask any of us here, "Do you love God?" I hope anyone would say, "Yes, I love God my Father in heaven! Yes, I love my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ!" And yet when it comes to putting our love for God into practice, our love doesn't look so exemplary, does it? Jesus says, "If you love me, you will obey what I command." John says, "This is love for God: to obey his commands. And his commands are not burdensome." But if loving God is obeying him and keeping his commandments, I must admit my love has so often grown very cold. You must confess the same. Instead of obedience and self-sacrifice, we have pursued pleasure and acted in our own self-interest. Our hearts have turned away from God and fallen in love with the world; we've loved what makes us happy rather than what makes God happy. We love things that are vacuous and meaningless, things without substance and lasting value. We love our stuff. We love our cars and our clothes and our electronics. We love our leisure and our "me-time." We love to be popular. We crave acceptance and praise from others. We might say, "I love Jesus," well enough, but our hymns are halfhearted, our praise is muted, our confession is cautious, our offerings represent but a poor percentage of our prosperity, and our witness in the world is virtually nonexistent. But we say we love God and his Son, Jesus Christ! This is love? O Lord, have mercy on me for such "love"!

Every failure to love God and love our neighbor is sin. The just wages we have earned with our sin is death. Not just the end of our brief existence on this earth and the death of our mortal body, but eternal death. Every loveless act, every loveless deed, every loveless thought has earned us an eternity of blackest darkness and unending fire. Jesus tells us this, and he tells us this is the destiny of every human being who does not know and trust in him.

Thankfully, our connection with our God and Savior is not defined by *our* love for God or *our* love for our neighbor. St. John defines for us what real love looks like; what love is. *This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and gave his Son as the atoning sacrifice for our sins.* Pause and reflect on those words just a moment. *This is love: not that we loved God.* Our love for God doesn't set the standard or define what real love looks like. Thank God it doesn't! *But that he loved us and gave his Son as the atoning sacrifice for our sins.* You want to see what real love looks like? God is love! God is the essence of love! Jesus Christ, God's Son, is love in the flesh, love incarnate. God justifies, he forgives, he washes and cleanses the wicked, the unloving. He has done this for you and for me. God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us (Romans 5:8). *This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him.*

God does not want sinners to die eternally. God does not want his precious creatures to be cast into outer darkness. God does not want anyone to perish. God is love! He loves every human being so much that for every single human soul who has ever existed he gave his Son as the atoning sacrifice for our sins. We needed a substitute to take our place under the death sentence we rightfully deserved, so Jesus took our place, under God's law, under God's wrath, to pay the price for the sin of the world, so that on the cross-God's love and his justice are reconciled in the sacrificial death of Jesus. This is the ultimate expression of God's love in action! *This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and gave his Son as the atoning sacrifice for our sins.*

This is love! God doesn't want anyone to perish but everyone to come to repentance. This is love! God wants everyone to turn away from our self-absorbed self-love, look to Jesus and to be wrapped in his perfect love. The day is quickly coming for each of us when we must stand before the judgment seat of God. On that day, God, please don't judge us for our love. Judge us for Jesus' love. Don't give us what we deserve and what we have earned. Give us what Jesus has earned for us!

I'm going to tie this back to a thought for Mother's Day. Moms, your greatest task and your greatest joy is to teach your children what love is. It is to show them your love for them, and much more than that it is to show them Jesus' love for them, so that they can be completely secure and confident in God's love. You do that when you teach your children Bible history, God's love told to us on the pages of Scripture. You do that when you teach your children to sing, "Jesus loves me." You show them God's love when you say, "I forgive you," when they've done something sinful. You do that when you fold your hands with your children and cradle them on your lap and snuggle them close and comfort them with words of love and kindness from their loving Savior Jesus.

Every Mom that I know wants to be a good Mom. What does that mean? In today's world, Moms can feel all kinds of pressure to live up to all kinds of expectations of what it means to be a "good Mom." What does that look like? It means that among all the things you do, above all else you teach them what love is. Maybe you can't get to every sporting event, every recital or every play. Maybe the house gets messy and maybe supper gets burnt—and maybe in your household those aren't even your responsibility. Whatever you do in your role as a godly mother, teach your children what love is. *This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and gave his Son as the atoning sacrifice for our sins.* Then, whether you're a Mom or a Dad, a son or a daughter, you can cherish God's love for you and rest confident and secure in Jesus' love. Amen.