



May 5-6, 2024
Trinity Ev. Lutheran Church

1 John 4:7-14

Easter Sunday #6
Rev. Glenn L. Schwanke

Dear friends in Christ Jesus,

The song has been recorded by over 100 different artists, including Jackie DeShannon, the Supremes, Dionne Warwick, Johnny Mathis, Luther Vandross, and more recently, Kree Harris the runner-up on the 12th season of American Idol. Burt Bacharach wrote the melody, and Mr. Hal David, in a nostalgia piece from 2009, reminisced about how he wrote the famous lyrics.

"I was living in Roslyn, New York, on the north shore of Long Island, which is where my children were raised. I would drive into Manhattan every day to meet Burt (Bacharach) at the Brill Building in Famous Music's offices on the sixth floor, where we did our writing. Mine was a rock and roll house where each of my kids had a band that practiced there. It was hard for me to find somewhere quiet to work so I would drive into town slowly, which would give me the opportunity to think and get ideas. I would write in my head during the ride. . . . Before I got into Manhattan that day, I had the chorus the way it is now."

And what was that? The song some of us know quite well. *"What the world needs now is love, sweet love, It's the only thing that there's just too little of. What the world needs now is love, sweet love, No not just for some but for everyone."* Well, Mr. David, when we Christians survey the wondrous cross, we see that love you yearned for! **The Cross Proves God's Love! I. Love, Perfect Love, For Us. II. Love, Selfless Love, Reflected In Us.**

I. Love, Perfect Love, For us!

Before I go any further, I feel the need to address the problem with the word "love" in our English language. It's too broad. Too generic. It can mean too many different things. When I say, *"I love smoked fish,"* I better not mean the same thing as when I used to say about my wife, Terry, when she was alive, *"I love my wife."* If I had done that in her hearing, I'd have deserved to spend a few nights sleeping in our Yooper shed, in the dead of winter—without a heater.

Then, too, for most modern Americans, when we hear the word "love" we think of an emotion, a feeling. And feelings change: they come and go; they ebb and flow like the tides. Far too many married couples fall out of "love" these days, and their marriages fall apart in the process. Far too often our "love" is flawed. It's selfish, not selfless. We feel love for others because of what they can do for us, what they can give us. Only then will we love them back.

Is that the way God's love works? No! And John wants us to know that! The Apostle wrote the words of our text when he lived and worked in Ephesus. He was an old man by this time. Probably in his 90's, writing 1, 2, and 3 John sometime between 90 to 94 A.D. The world in which John lived certainly needed *"love, sweet love."* Christians, in particular, weren't feeling it. If ever we feel persecuted in our modern, increasingly godless secular society, we need to remember how bad it was back in John's day. He's the only one of the apostles who lived to old age. All the others had been martyred for the faith decades earlier. And John? In 95 to 96 AD, this old, old man was exiled on the Island of Patmos because of his faith. As a leader in the Christian church, he was targeted in the persecution of Christians that took place under Emperor Domitian.

What John's world needed was *"love, sweet love, not just for some but for everyone."* But John already had that love. He knew that love. So he wrote about that love. *"This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins."*

"Not that we loved God." Our love for our Lord is always going to be flawed. It's always going to fall-short of his expectations. And what does God expect? In Mark's Gospel, the 12th chapter, there is the record about a teacher of the law, a religious expert, who came to Jesus with a question. *"Which commandment is the greatest of all?"* (Mark 12:28) The question was probably a trick. For sure, it was a doozy, because the Pharisees constantly debated it. But they didn't limit the debate to God's 10 commandments. They included all 613 they had subdivided and expanded over the centuries. Now, let's assume that Jesus would ignore the 603 man-made ordinances and stick with God's 10. How should our Savior answer? Would he pick the first commandment? *"Thou shalt have no other gods?"* Then what about the 5th commandment, *"Thou shalt not kill!"* If we ignore that commandment the fabric of our society will break down. Our cities and our streets won't be safe. And we'll all be doomed to be preppers, living way back out in the bush, hiding deep in our concrete bunkers with our stash of Spam and Cheez-whiz. But Jesus didn't single out one of the 10 commandments that day. Instead, our Savior answered in a way that proves he is the Word made Flesh.



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Jesus' knows his Father's word and will backwards and forwards and inside-out. So he said, "*The most important is: 'Hear, O Israel, the Lord, our God, the Lord is one. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength.' The second is this: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these.*" (Mark 12:29-31)

Jesus quoted from the Old Testament with his answer. Deuteronomy 6:4-5 and Leviticus 19:18. Those were words his listeners would know by heart, because they had them memorized. They used them every day, three times, as part of a memorized prayer.

"*Not that we loved God!*" "*With all our heart, and with all our soul, and with all our mind, and with all our strength!*" How can we possibly do that? Give our Lord perfect love, complete love, total devotion all day, every day, both day and night? When all of us are afflicted with attention-deficit spiritual disorder. Our love for the Lord is flawed. It falls short. We're going to prove that beyond all doubt in a few minutes when we talk about our love for others which ought to reflect our love for the Lord! What the song-writer said still rings true. "*What the world needs now is love, sweet love. . .no, not just for some but for everyone.*"

Yet that's exactly what we get in Christ! That's what his cross proves! We don't have to wonder, "*Does God love me?*" All we have to do is see Jesus with his arms outstretched! It's as if he is shouting to us, "*I love you this much!*" John guarantees that this is true when he adds, "*We have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world.*" (1John 4:14) If we ever doubt that Jesus actually sacrificed himself for us on the cross, we just need to remember that John was there on that Good Friday. He is the only one of the apostles specifically mentioned, by name, as being present on Golgotha's hill! So John witnessed what Jesus did for us. He heard the words Jesus spoke from the cross. He saw him bow his head and give up the spirit. John even saw the Roman soldier drive his spear into Jesus' side, causing both blood and water to flow—a sure sign of death! (John 19:33-37)

"*This is love!*" John saw perfect love in action: selfless love, giving love, forgiving love. The highest and noblest love that Jesus had discussed with his disciples on Maundy Thursday evening. "*No one has greater love than this: that someone lays down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you continue to do the things I instruct you.*" (John 15:13-14)

And what instructions does our Lord leave us? "*Love your neighbor as yourself.*" With the selfless love that Jesus embodied on the cross, because everything he did there he did for us. Because of us. Our sins. Our flaws. Our selfishness. That's humbling. And his sacrifice is supposed to be moving. For when we listen to John, we learn it is our Lord's desire to see. . .

II. Love, Selfless Love, Reflected In Us.

Love is a major theme of this 1st Epistle of John. But I wonder? Have we defined "love" in a handy way you can take with you when you leave this house of God after worship? So far we've established that it's a whole lot more than a feeling. And it's not flawed—not God's perfect love. His love is selfless. It's giving. It's sacrificial.

And God's love is easy for everyone to see! John makes that clear when he writes, "*This is how God's love for us was revealed: God has sent his only-begotten Son into the world so that we may live through him.*" (1John 4:9) God's love moved him to act. To send his Son into our world! To reach out to help you and me and our fallen race. Not because we deserved it. And certainly not because we were loving him back the way he wants.

After all, we can't even love each other the way the Lord wants. The Apostle Paul once wrote, "*Love does no harm to a neighbor, so love is the fulfillment of the law.*" (Romans 13:10) Do you get along with all your neighbors perfectly? Do you ever mutter a few words under your breath, when it's 2 or 3 in the morning, you're tossing and turning in your sleep, because there's a loud, wild party going on next door? Or--and this is a huge issue in the Copper Country—did you say a few nasty things about your neighbor because they plowed the snow out of their driveway into your yard? Do you even know every one of your neighbors? Would you know if they were sick and in the hospital? Of if they could use a hot dish brought in to help while they recuperate? Sometimes we get so busy in our lives, we cocoon ourselves from those around us. It's mighty hard to "*love your neighbor as yourself,*" if you have nothing to do with them.

John urges a better way. In repeated, impassioned pleas, John tells us, "*Dear friends, let us love one another, because love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. . . Dear friends, if God loved us so much, we also should love one another.*" You can talk all you want about how loving, kind, generous,



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considerate, forgiving and patient you are. But words aren't always enough. If you and I really reflect God's selfless love in our lives, we won't have to tell others we love them. They'll be able to see it. John explains, *"No one has ever seen God. If we love one another, God remains in us and his love has been brought to its goal in us."* God's love, selfless love, is then reflected in our lives.

As it was reflected in the lives of the early Christians. Though so many of them were brutally persecuted and killed for their faith, yet they had a reputation for being caring, forgiving, and loving! There was a Roman saying for the Christians: *"See, how they love one another!"*

Justin Martyr, a leader and great theologian of the early church--who got his last name, by the way, because he was martyred for the faith in 165 AD--once described the love of early Christians this way. *"We who used to value the acquisition of wealth and possessions more than anything else now bring what we have into a common fund and share it with anyone who needs it. We used to hate and destroy one another and refused to associate with people of another race or country. Now, because of Christ, we live together with such people and pray for our enemies."* Can the same be said of us?

When a devastating plague swept across the ancient world in the third century, Christians cared for the sick, which they did at the risk of contracting the plague themselves. Meanwhile, pagans, the non-Christians were throwing infected members of their own families into the streets even before they died, in order to protect themselves from the disease. Kind of the reverse of the old saying about rats abandoning the ship!

But why did Christians risk everything to help in the plague? As one Christian told the Romans, *"We love one another with a mutual love because we do not know how to hate."* If Christians today made such a statement to the world, would the world believe it? Do others see love, selfless love, reflected in us? Reflected in our personal life, whether we are at home, at work or at school? Reflected in our family life? Reflected in this church? Reflected in our grade school? By the service projects we do? By our commitment to our mission, where we still dare to point out sin—even though that's getting more and more dangerous—personally, professionally, academically?

Is ours a love that invites others to kneel with us and survey the wondrous cross? For when we do, we will see what the world needs now, *"love, sweet love."* And on our knees, I pray we'll be moved to sing with Isaac Watts: *"Were the whole realm of nature mine, that were a present far too small. Love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all."* Amen

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