

ANCHORED

Grounded in the Character of God



Pastor Terry Sanderson
North Park Community Church
Anchored: The Love of God
June 13-14, 2009

Can you think of the last time that you were absolutely speechless? Where were you when your mouth dropped open and you didn't know what to say? I think that happened the very first time I saw the Grand Canyon. You can see pictures and know a dictionary definition but some things need to be experienced to be fully understood. You stand there looking at this deep expanse and have no idea what to say. You can only drink it in. When I stood up here almost fifteen years ago and looked at my bride Chantelle standing at that door dressed all in white, I didn't really know what to say. When my babies were born, I was absolutely speechless. There are some things about God that leave me absolutely speechless. There are things that, when I think about them, my jaw just drops. We have been looking at the character of God. We have seen that He is holy, just, powerful, good and glorious.

The Apostle John was Jesus' closest earthly friend. He knew the love of God given through Christ. In his letter, John writes about that love and is almost speechless. He doesn't quite know what to do with the truth that God is love. He knows something about that love. He knows what it means to be fully loved. He understands how the love of God can change a person. In the song "What's Love Got to Do With It?" sung by Tina Turner, there is a line, "Love is nothing but a secondhand emotion." That is not what the Apostle John understands; he has been gripped by the jaw-dropping love of God. We have been studying this letter that John has written. In particular, we have looked at staying close to God. We looked at what that means and some of the benefits. As John talks about this, he seems to be overwhelmed. He becomes amazed again at the profound love of God that he has fully experienced.

We all have a desperate need to be loved. Inside we are screaming, "Love me." Some of you may not want to admit it but it is a deep need to be loved. The misunderstanding that we have is that many of us don't fully understand that God's love is personal for us. We've heard it before. God's love is

big. His love is universal. But is it personal? Does it have my name on it? Many of us have probably heard a message on God's love. My prayer today is that when you leave, you would not leave as the same person. My hope is that this sermon is not merely a nice poetic message on the love of God but that it is personal, inspirational and transformational. We are spinning around in a love starved world. We see it every day in the newspaper. The Bible boldly proclaims there is only one love in the universe that has what it takes to meet this loved starved need. It is God's love. You can try to fill your need with whatever you want but there is only one answer. It is God's love. God's love has drawn you here. He has drawn you to learn more about His love.

J.I. Packer, Canadian theologian and one of the most influential North American evangelicals of this century, uses wonderful images to speak of God's love:

*When we study God's wisdom, we learn about his mind.
When we study God's power, we learn about his arm.
When we study God's knowledge, we learn about his eyes.
When we study God's word, we learn about his mouth.
When we study God's love, we learn about his heart.*

What do you do with God's love? Has that love really gripped you? That is what John talks about:

And now, dear children, continue in him, so that when he appears we may be confident and unashamed before him at his coming. If you know that he is righteous, you know that everyone who does what is right has been born of him. How great is the love the Father has lavished on 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 him. Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. (1 John 2:28-3:2)

God's love is overwhelming

The Bible says many things about the different characteristics of God but there are only three things the Bible records concerning the nature of God. John says that God is spirit (John 4:24). God is spirit in the highest sense indicating He has no physical body. He is not limited to time and space but can be everywhere at once. Because He is spirit He can fill all heaven and earth. Because He is spirit He is able to be all knowing and all present. Secondly, John says that God is light (1 John 1:5). Light is the opposite of dark and in the Bible darkness stands for sin, evil and death. You heard in last week's sermon about His holiness. Light stands for His holiness, goodness and life. John also says that God is love. The Bible does not simply suggest that God loves, but that He is love. Love is not merely something God does; rather it is His nature. It is not accidental or incidental to God. Just as He is spirit and cannot have a physical body. Just as He is light and His brilliance can never be darkened, He is love. God doesn't love because He is obligated to do so. It is His nature. He cannot not love. It is impossible for Him not to be relational. Love is so much a part of the character of God that He went to extreme depths to express it. Love is more than a characteristic. It is a component part of who He is.

The Apostle John is blown away by two things: the love of God and by what His love does. It comes when one is completely dumbfounded by what one sees and one needs to look and ponder this more. John is like, whoa! Here is God's love and let's take a moment to look at it. Behold what manner of love the Father has lavished upon us. Be staggered by it. What you have to understand is that the Gnostic teachers of Jesus' day were denying that God loved them. They denied that Jesus was sent. They denied that God could love. Deny it? John could not comprehend that denial because he was so staggered by God's love.

Here is an astonishing thing, John says. It is not the fact that God loves but how God loves. What manner of love is this? Literally, the Greek for 'what manner' means what country is this? Have you ever seen something from a culture that you had not seen before? It was something that was so incredible, you wanted to look at it, study it and understand it more. The love that the Father has lavishes on us is an extravagant love. The word for a 'manner of love' is a word that illustrates an incredibly wealthy man who keeps giving away his wealth. This is a person like Solomon who had so much wealth, that if he started to give out his wealth, he could never give it all away. Wow! John is saying, you and I receive and receive and receive God's love and yet it never runs out. This is reassuring because there are times we think that we have used up God's love and He has none left to give.

In Texas there is this underground water reservoir. It is known as the Texas Aquifer. It extends a couple hundred miles north and south and is wide. People can measure its area but they have no idea how deep it is. They have no idea how much water is there. They can never fully plumb the depths of how much there is. John wants us to remember that God never runs out of love. No matter how dark the world is

the Father's love will permeate it. No matter how dark your world is right now, the Father has more than enough love. Look at it. Behold it. Right here in the middle of John's Gospel, he writes about the love of God. Don't forget this. Don't live as if this isn't real. Some in the church for whom John was writing were living highly decadent lives. They were living as they wanted. Then John says, "But don't you remember it was the Father who put on you a love so great?" It was a love so wonderful that the world has only yet begun to understand it. You never see the love of God clinically defined in Scripture. You always see it graphically illustrated. People keep saying, "What kind of God is this?" They have a jaw-dropping view of God.

God's love described

David writes about the love of God in Scripture. He describes it as a father's love. When it comes to His love for sinful people, God's got a long fuse, a short memory, a thick skin, and a big heart. In Psalm 103 David describes God's patience with us: "*The Lord is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in love.*" (Psalm 103:8) He's got a long fuse. This is actually a quotation of something Moses had written some 500 years earlier. Many other Bible writers quote this phrase, first recorded in Exodus 24. While Moses was at the top of Mount Sinai conferring with God Almighty, the people were having a party. These people whom God had just delivered from bondage in Egypt were expressing their gratitude to God by worshiping an idol of a golden calf made from discarded jewelry. On top of that there was drunkenness and immorality. Scripture says that when God saw this He was angry. God told Moses to step back. He said, "Mo, I'm going to destroy these party animals. I'll start a new nation with you. How about it?" Moses fell on his face and appealed to God's grace. God agrees with Moses and withholds His righteous wrath. He forgoes punishing these folks but adds, "I'm through with them. I won't destroy them, but I will no longer go with you, Moses. You're on your own." Once again Moses pleads with God to reconsider. Once again, amazingly, God agrees. He even promises to give Moses a new copy of the Ten Commandments. You'll recall from the story, Moses had shattered the original copy when he came down the mountain and found the people partying. Yes, God gets angry. But God puts up with a great deal before reaching His boiling point. Over and over again, the Bible tells us the reason God exercises such great patience is that He's hoping we'll take advantage of this extension of His grace to turn from our sin, seek His forgiveness, and begin to obey Him.

Secondly, He has a short memory: "*He will not always accuse, nor will he harbor his anger forever.*" (Psalm 103:9) A guy complained to his buddy that whenever he argued with his wife, she got historical. His friend said, "You mean hysterical." He said, "No, historical. She dredges up the past and reminds me of every time I've failed her in the past." We do that with our kids sometimes, don't we? Our kids do something wrong and we remind them of the previous forty-three times that they did the same thing. Father God will not always accuse nor will He harbour His anger forever. God chooses to have a short memory. Psalm 130:3 tells us that if

God kept a detailed record of our sins, none of us would ever be able to stand before Him. In Isaiah 57:16, God says, "If I kept throwing up in your face your past failures, if I chose to retain an angry disposition toward you because of your sin, your spirit within you would grow faint before me. You would wither up and die." Can you imagine this? I go to God for forgiveness because I've unleashed a torrent of harsh words on one of my kids. I say, "I did it again, God. Oh, please cleanse me from this sin and give me the strength to manage my mouth." And God says, "You did it again? That's putting it rather mildly, Terry. This is the seventy-third time you've done it this week. And, Terry, I stop forgiving after fifty. Sorry, pal, but your punch card is all punched out." Is that how God operates with us? Not at all.

He also has a thick skin: "*He does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities.*" (Psalm 103:10) If God punished us every time we deserved it, we would be in a perpetual state of receiving retribution. Every time we turned around, God would be chastening us for a selfish attitude or hurtful words or prideful spirit or materialism or indifference to the needs of others or something. The biblical word for this thick skin of God is forbearance. We are told "...*love covers a multitude of sins.*" (1 Peter 4:8) There are a lot of things that God never brings up to us because He's chosen just to ignore them. Love covers a multitude of sins.

And He has a big heart: "*As a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear him. For he knows how we are formed. He remembers that we are dust. As for man, his days are like grass. He flourishes like a flower of the field. The wind blows over it and it is gone, and its place remembers it no more.*" (Psalm 103:13-16)

God's love expressed.

How does this God who is love, express His love? **First He pronounces it.** He says it. He expresses it. He writes it down. He says, "I love you." That is a high risk pronouncement, wouldn't you agree? Do you remember when you told someone for the first time you loved him or her? You had been on a date and were standing at the door or sitting in the car. You said how nice a time it was. You were hoping you would get a response. And when you got past those awkward hurdles, you might try to say something more. Finally you say, "I love you." And it seems like an eternity while you wait for an answer! Will he or she reciprocate? God makes this high risk pronouncement. He comes right out and says it even though He knows we might reject it. "I love you." When you make a statement like that, you have to back it up. He writes it down. He puts it in print.

God pronounces His love. **He also illustrates it.** He describes it in many different ways. Jesus told the story of the prodigal son. In reality, it is not the story of the prodigal son. It is the story of the prodigal father. The word 'prodigal' means recklessly extravagant or it means someone who is characterized by wasteful expenditure. Of course, that does fit the son in the story. Jesus told the story of two brothers who grew up in a wealthy family. One didn't want to stay at home anymore, so he asked for his part of the inheritance thinking he could make more of his life. But of course, he took that money and was recklessly extravagant. He gave it away and spent it wastefully. When he got down to nothing, he didn't know what to

do. So, he went back to his dad. You think the son was a prodigal? You think the son was extravagant and wasteful? Then you should see the father! The son's extravagance was nothing compared to the father's. Here we see the dad, waiting every day at the end of the road, hoping his son would return. And when he sees his son, still far off, he picks up his robes and runs to him. In that era, this is not what someone with wealth, power and status would do. It was undignified. But listen to what else the father does. He tells a servant to kill the fatted calf. This was not cheap food. This was the best. Then he put the nicest clothes on the son. But, get this. He put a ring on his son's finger. Now, what we need to understand is that in this culture, a ring was used to stamp business transactions. It was a ring that was used to sign deals. In Jesus' day this was the equivalent of giving someone your credit card. Can you picture the jaws dropping of those who were listening? Here was a guy who had just squandered an immense amount of money. He had blown it! And what does the father do? He gives him more. He says take the credit card get what you want. You need something? It is yours. My riches are still yours. And the listeners no doubt, were trying to figure out how the dad could do that. What kind of love would a father have to go right back and trust his child again? Jesus says, "Father God is that kind of father." That is the prodigal love of our God. It is a love that defies extravagance. It is a love that gives and gives and gives and there is always more to give. Two thousand years ago, Jesus Christ graphically demonstrated that love by dying on a cross for you.

Then God demonstrated his love. He put His love in action. He demonstrated His love to Adam and Eve. After they sinned, He gave them a second chance. Noah and his family were in a serious flood and God delivered them. David committed adultery with Bathsheba; God demonstrated his love to David by forgiving him. Abraham was going to sacrifice his son in obedience to God and God demonstrated His love to Abraham by providing a ram in place of his son. Then God expressed His love to us by sending Jesus. He put on flesh. He got knocked around on the playing fields of life. Jesus was a sacrifice for us. The cross stands as the ultimate symbol of God's love.

Do you want to know if God's love is enough for you? If you are honest and willing to look at the very interior of your soul, you are sure to find an insatiable thirst. Our souls scream for a love that is so strong, so relentless and so stubborn. It is a love we can never let go of. He loved us first and all we can do is pursue it. You have a choice of two responses to this love. You can be offended by God's love. You can diminish it by believing it might be a secondhand emotion and live with an unquenchable thirst in your soul. Or you can embrace that love.

Several years ago, on one of those network news shows, they did a story about the extent of love. It focused on a young woman, engaged to be married, who had needed a kidney transplant. Her fiancé was standing next to her, holding her hand. He had donated his kidney. The young woman says she can never thank him enough. And when they get married, she knew that every time she would wrap her arms around him

and hug him, she would feel that scar and know how much he loves her. Some day, when I get to heaven, I am going to hug Jesus and when I do, I'm going to feel that scar where a spear went in and I will know firsthand, face-to-face how much He loves me. God's grace has been poured out for you and me. When God gives you a gift, you receive it. John reminds us of the power of God's love. He has been writing about thinking right and about right understanding and about right practice with God, but all of that comes from a right response to His love. How have you responded?

John says that love does something. It makes us children of God. It puts us in a family. We have a place to belong! We are His kids and the Bible tells us that some things happen to us. We are led by the Spirit of God. We are so united to God by His Spirit that He is leading us and is in us. He transforms us by the renewing of our minds so that we will value what He values and, along the way, listen to His voice: "...because those who are led by the Spirit of God are the children of God." (Romans 8:14) We are also heirs of all things. Being God's children means that we are going to inherit what God owns: "*The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children heirs also, heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ...*" (Romans 8:16-17) What an impact it should have on our lives, the way we think about possessions and the need to own things. The way we think about pride and the importance of having instead of being. I have the feeling that God revealed this to us so that in one sense, we could get it out of our system and focus on other things. It is like God is saying, "All right, you like to know things. You like to have things. You think that is important. Okay. Here is the deal. You own everything. You are heirs. You just have to wait. It is a matter of time."

It also means that as children, we reflect God. There is a very close relationship between the look and actions of children and their parents. The ways children are treated are often reflected in the way parents are treated. One of the first questions we ask when we hear of the birth of a baby is, who does she look like? Does he resemble his mom or his dad? Features such as physical appearance, including the colour of hair and eyes, facial characteristics, the shape of the mouth or nose, height and build are given at birth. Later on, as the child grows and begins to reflect his or her parents' habits of action, speech or attitude, we may speak of a child as a chip off the old block. Although not all children are simply smaller versions of their parents, there are likenesses.

Genetics show, John is saying. When you are His children, your genetics show. It is a reflection both ways. If you are His children, you will live a certain way. How you live reflects who your Father is. When we are children of God, it will show. When you are born of God, you will do right. When you have the Spirit of God, you are capable of doing great things. When God is your Father, you are capable of doing things that no one else can do. It is really here, in these verses that John starts using some terms like righteousness. He does not use it cheaply or loosely. When we think of it, we often lower the bar on this. Often we lower the bar to what everyone else does. We just try harder to live good lives and do what is right. But John is saying something different. He is saying we have different DNA. We have the power of God. We are His kids. We have His Spirit. We have His presence. We are recipients of this amazing love and that does something to us. It changes us. He is talking about a life that is energized by God.

At the 1992 Olympics in Barcelona, Spain the world watched a dad's love played out on international television. It can be viewed as a reflection, on a human level, of God's love. As the gun sounded for the 400 meter race, Great Britain's Derrick Redman knew that his lifelong dream of winning the gold medal was in reach. But as he entered the back stretch, Redman was sent sprawling by the ripping pain of a torn hamstring. By an act of sheer will, he struggled to his feet in excruciating pain and began hopping toward the finish line. Suddenly Derrick's father bounded out of the stands and past a security guard. He threw his arms around his son. In a voice choked with emotion, he whispered, "Come on son, let's finish this together." The crowd cheered and wept as they watched the father half-carrying his wounded son down the stretch and across the finish line.

When we love with the love of God, the world often cannot recognize it. The world's love is partial to favourites. It can be prejudiced against certain people. It can be smothering so that the person loved feels deprived of individuality. It can be wholly unfair and therefore is unrighteous love. But true love – God's love – is thoughtful. It is courteous. It bears the cost of pain and heartache. It has satisfied justice. It is careful to do the right thing. In the eyes of a stuffy, respectable, self-centered world, anyone who acts with that kind of love is always a bit suspect. They appear to be slightly mad. Thus John says, the world will not recognize us if we act this way, just as they did not recognize the Lord when He did. Because we act differently, they regard us as rather foolish, ignorant and slightly crazy. We are walking and living to a different drumbeat.