

“A Love as Big as a Blue Whale’s Heart”

1 John 4:7-9, 11-12

Sermon notes from the Pulpit of
First Presbyterian Church, Champaign, IL
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April 28, 2024

Trevor Barton is a reading intervention teacher. In his blog, he shares his story. He told his students one day that a blue whale’s heart is as big as a Volkswagen. “It is so big,” he said, “you could walk around inside of it.” (See, *As big as a blue whale’s heart*, December 27, 2013, **The Journal**, p. 39).

He asked the kids, “Why do blue whales have such enormous hearts?” He put the kids into groups so they could brainstorm their answers. After 40 minutes, this is what they reported out:

“Blue whales swim all over the world,” said Ki’ara. “So they need a humongous heart to be their motor.”

“Blue whales can call to each other over almost one thousand miles,” said Heavely. “They need a big heart to talk to each other.”

“They swim together in pairs,” said Amare, “so they need huge hearts to care for each other.”

What he calls his “Blue Whale Exercise” always yields interesting observations. Ultimately the exercise veers from science to an exploration of the ways students can have big hearts instead of small hearts for each other. The Blue Whale Exercise almost always leads to conversations about human love.

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The three letters of John—just over 3,000 words—are a primer that emphasize the ethics of LOVE and Christology.

This idea is nothing new, John tells the church. You’ve had this commandment to love “from the beginning” (1 John 1:7). Jesus and his love is the true light. Bear that light to others. “Whoever says, ‘I am in the light,’ while hating a brother or sister, is still in the darkness.”

To read these letters from John is to read the word “love” some 65 times. Love, love, love. He’s serious about the Christian call to love. John can’t talk about God’s love enough.

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We explore that word in a roundabout way every Wednesday afternoon at our DREAAM “youth club” dinners.

As you know, on Wednesdays we host our middle school DREAAMers for dinner. We share some mixer-activities, then a Bible story followed by a home-cooked meal.

The point is, we want these kids to walk away from our church feeling welcomed and affirmed. We want these kids to experience the church in a positive way. We want them to feel like they belong when they are here. *We want them to feel loved.* We have table conversation over dinner—*sobremesa* is what our Cuban friends might call it: talk over the table, table talk. We collect written prayer concerns at each dinner. We pray. We pick up our dishes. We say goodbye.

This simple gathering on Wednesdays is meant to embody the love John talks about.

Our Bible story some weeks ago was the story of the paralyzed man and his friends lugging him around on a mat (Luke 5). They want Jesus to see their friend because they believe Jesus can heal him. But the house Jesus is in is too crowded. The doors are blocked. The windows are blocked. The alley is blocked. Every way is blocked. They can't get in.

Those friends don't go home. Those friends don't go out for a milkshake and say, "Well, we tried. We love you, friend."

They climbed up on the roof. They took the roof apart. They tied ropes to their friend's mat. They lowered their friend through the ceiling to Jesus' feet. Nothing was going to keep them from accomplishing their mission to get their friend a visit with Jesus.

This text gets us thinking about things. Do we have friends like that, friends who would go the extra mile for us? More importantly, are we that kind of friend to others?

Jesus did the rest, of course. He healed the man of his sin and of his paralysis. But that paralyzed man's friends loved him enough to get him there.

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Nobody talks more eloquently about love than John. But nobody shows us any better than Jesus. And that's John's point. Jesus loved us even though it was dangerous. Jesus loved us—and he didn't *have to love us*—even to a cross. Such is the tremendous love that God has for us; and such is the tremendous love God wants us to share with others.

We love, says John, because God's love came first. You can't love unless you ARE loved. We are loved, John says; pass it on. When we love, God's love in us grows and grows and grows.

That's what Trevor Barton notices in the hallways and classrooms of his elementary school. When kids and teachers love, the love grows.

The school secretary told Trevor Barton this story:

Jaylen stops what he's doing in the school office and looks at Noah who is having trouble tying his shoes. At a certain age, it's embarrassing when you can't tie your shoes. At a certain age, you don't want to be seen with other kids who can't tie their shoes. Children can be cruel: they can point, and laugh, and make fun. Jaylen walks over to Noah and not only does Jaylen tie Noah's shoe, he teaches Noah how to tie his shoes.

Perhaps Jaylen had been a part of Mr. Barton's talk about having a heart as big as a blue whale's heart.

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Often when we share communion, we sing these words as an introduction to our Great Prayer of Thanksgiving (sung to "Day Is Done" *Ar Hyd Y Nos*):

For the fruit of all creation, Thanks be to God.

For the gifts to every nation, Thanks be to God.

For the wonders that astound us, For the truths that still confound us.

Most of all that love has found us, Thanks be to God...

God's love, has in fact, found us. Because of this love, which leads the way, let us continuing trying to love one another...

in the name of
God the Father,
God the Son,
and God the Holy Spirit.
AMEN

1 John 4:7-9, 11-12 7 Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. 8 Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. 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.

11 Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. 12 No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.