
The Great Loving Church

1 John 4:7-21

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on May 3, 2015 by the Rev. Dr. Luke A. Powery

In my first couple of weeks as dean of Duke Chapel, I had what I called “listening sessions” with various groups across the life of the university and chapel community. I listened, listened, and listened. If there were a certificate for the hearing, I would have earned it in the first few months. One of the cohorts with whom I met for breakfast in the chapel conference room downstairs was some Pathways students; Pathways is the Chapel’s student ministry. What I heard that morning from those students, I have kept on my iPhone ever since. The students may not remember but I don’t want to forget their answers to this question—What do students need from Duke Chapel? They didn’t name another program or even free tickets to a Duke Men’s basketball game in the Final Four or better yet, free tickets to the Messiah performance with backstage passes to meet the choral director, Rodney Wynkoop. They named these four things: a sense of belonging, to be valued as a person, a place for the lost or safe space, and last but not least, the four letter word—love.

They didn’t ask for more worship services or concerts or bible studies or service opportunities or even more sermons (shame on them!), they asked for love. Love takes one second to say. Maybe one hour to explain. But it will take your whole life to learn and God shows that it actually takes a life, a human life.

A couple of years ago, President Brodhead gave a talk to university faculty about all of the building construction projects happening on campus. You probably have noticed that there’s lots of construction going on. In his talk, he said something that stuck with me: buildings, he said, have human goals. Buildings are means, not ends. The *telos*, the end, is human. In the case of Duke Chapel, the end is also spiritual; the end rises like gothic spires toward God. The Duke Chapel building is a means to encounter God and one another. The Chapel building is not an end in and of itself, especially when it comes to love. A building cannot love. A person loves. Perhaps one might experience love inside a building but the love comes from someone or something else.

When they were laying out the plans for the University named in honor of his family, James B. Duke said, “I want the central building to be a church, a great towering church which will dominate all of the surrounding buildings, because such an edifice would be bound to have a profound influence on the spiritual life of the young men and young women who come here.” This “great towering church,” symbolic of our great towering God, has had profound influence on young *and* old for at least 80 years. Yet, its influence is not necessarily because it stands 210 feet from foundation to spire or because it has 77 stain glass windows.

Its influence is due to more than the fact that it is a gorgeous building. The influence has grown over time from Durham to North Carolina to the nation and world because of the people who fill and use this building. I say this because a church building without people is a museum; this surely isn’t a museum, even though it is a top tourist spot in the state. Duke Chapel is a living, breathing, flesh and blood expression of the body of Christ and the body of Christ is not a building; the body of Christ is the church, the people of God on a mission of love in the world. Wouldn’t it be something if we were not only known as the “great towering church” but also known as the great loving church?

The Pathways students were on to something when they said, “love.” They spoke of student needs but really this is what every human being needs. Last Spring, the Huffington Post made a list of the most spiritual places in each state. Duke Chapel was named the most spiritual place in North Carolina. This is not because of the building itself but because of what happens in the building.

Naturally, people are drawn to the beauty of the building, which speaks of the beauty of God. Eleanor Roosevelt was overheard, on a visit to Duke Chapel in 1934, saying, “These are by far the most beautiful windows in America.” These windows include green devils and appropriately, at least one blue devil. The intricate woodwork attracts some, including the wooden mice in VIP seating in the chancel. For others it is the sheer grandiose size that is the magnet. But more so, I believe it is what happens when people are in the building that makes it spiritual, makes it Christian, and makes it an oasis of love. Buildings don’t love but they may help our loving purposes. People love this place but what we love is really the love we receive here—the love of God through the love of others. It is the most spiritual place in North Carolina not because it is a grand cruciform symbol (crosses have been used for all kinds of evil purposes throughout history). It was deemed the most spiritual place because people encounter the salvation of God here. They experience love.

When the organs play and the choir sings and all the preachers proclaim and the ministers anoint and pray and some get baptized and others memorialized and others married, it is love that motivates these acts; it’s this love that is experienced by others. The Pathways students were on to something when they said, “love.” They were calling forth, without even knowing it, the future of Duke Chapel as the great loving church. Recently, some other students distorted this love a bit on the last day of classes—what we call LDOC—when a couple locked themselves in a chapel bathroom and it wasn’t for private prayer. The Chapel is a sanctuary but that took it a little too far. The love flows here at Duke Chapel when no one is really looking, when, to use a prayer of St. Augustine, some are watching or weeping in prayer during the night, the “dying ones,” “weary ones,” “suffering ones,” and “joyous ones.” Those ones know this chapel as a refuge for the grieving or a space for celebrations. Just recently, Duke alumni Elbert and Lois Wethington celebrated their 70th wedding anniversary by walking down the Chapel aisle again. Love.

Why is this important? It is important because Duke Chapel is not just a great towering church but called to be the great loving church as well, inside and outside the building. Some say, “the building wins” but in reality love should win because in the end as Romans 8 declares, “nothing will separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” That means love wins. And love transcends any physical space just as God does because “God is love” and God isn’t confined to any building.

“God is love.” The quality of God’s self is love though this is not exhaustive of the nature of God but love as a trait of God is undeniable. We only have one word in English for love but in Greek we learn there are different types of love and God’s love is distinct. Friendship love, *philia*, and romantic love, *eros*, entail some form of reciprocity, a string attached. But God’s love, *agape*, is not self-interested but detached to such an extent that it will suffer for the beloved; it will even love one’s enemy without any expectation of love returned.

And if you ever wondered what God’s love looks like, John helps us. “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. In this is love, not that we loved but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins.” Jesus was on his wooden deathbed, a cross, not saying a sinner’s prayer in his final hour, but saving a criminal—“Today, you will be with me in paradise.” God’s love, *agape*, is a suffering love.

And God first loved us. God takes the initiative to love and reveal love for us in Jesus Christ. We didn’t ask for it. We didn’t even know we needed it. God loves anyhow without knowing what the response will be. “Love is *from* God.” We don’t create love because we didn’t create God. Love created us, gave birth to us, and when God saw us at creation, God said, “It was good.” God’s love seeks us out and invites us to participate in his love. God is literally for-giving, giving love ahead of us before we even realize our need. We may have our doubts about this but our doubts don’t determine the action of God.

And God’s love is sacrificial in nature by sending his only Son to be an atoning sacrifice. Love is willing to die for someone, willing to give up one’s life selflessly for others. As Martin Luther taught about this passage—it “pictures Christ to us.” His dying was a sign of his loving. His love was a form of death for the purpose of life.

What wondrous love is this, O my soul, O my soul? It is a cruciform love, a suffering love, an amazing love, how can it be, that thou, my God, shouldst die for me?

And God's love is not abstract but very concrete. Love requires a person and in the case of God, it is embodied in the person of Jesus. Love is concretized, enfleshed. It must reveal itself in the world or it is not God's love. God's love was born in a Bethlehem manger, revealing that love has a face. In the movie, "Dead Man Walking," Matthew Poncelet is on death row for killing a teenage couple and during that time, Sister Helen becomes his spiritual advisor. Near the end of his life, when he is about to be killed by lethal injection, Sister Helen tells him: "I want the last face you see in this world to be the face of love, so you look at me when they do this thing. I'll be the face of love for you." *Agape* love has a face incarnate in Jesus Christ. Love is not something merely speculative but it takes action in this world, just as God took action to save us from death.

God's love is not only an antidote to fear, it is an antidote to ethical Docetism, which is the idea that the love of God is only in spirit and never takes on flesh through actions, involving others. God's love is not this way. It is not just something to think about. It is meant to be shared and spread unconditionally, meant to be given away to the world as we see Jesus Christ coming in the flesh (1 John 4:2). There's no abstraction with God's love. John makes this plain when he says, "Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love." "Everyone who loves is born of God and knows God." He makes a case for "theological genetics" (Thomas Slater). That is, it's not possible to be God's offspring if one doesn't love other people within the community. We reveal to whom we belong by our love. Maya Angelou, who spoke at the Duke freshman convocation for over 20 years in this building, said, "When people show you who they are, believe them."

Love must incarnate. If not, it is not God's love. Christians don't have the best track record, which is why people say the church would be great if it wasn't for the Christians. Not to love is a denial of God's presence in your life. Christ's love is the litmus test for Christians. It's where the rubber meets the road. "Those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also." In other words, "how can I say that I love the Lord whom I've never ever seen before and forget to say that I love the one that I walk beside each and every day, how can I look upon your face and ignore God's love, you I must embrace, You're my brother, you're my sister, and I love you with the love of the Lord." "Love one another."

"Love seems the swiftest," Mark Twain wrote, "but it is the slowest of all growths." To learn how to treat others as God has treated us really takes a lifetime to learn. We can't say, "I love God" but hate God's people. We can't say, "I love God," but hate those who practice their faith differently and believe differently. We can't say, "I love God" and hate those who were looting in Baltimore. God's love challenges us to love those breaking windows and those breaking spines because love is nondiscriminatory and is extended even toward our enemies. If not, our confessions of loving God only reveal that we live a lie. And it is true, as one preacher has noted, "It is possible to affirm the existence of God with your lips, but deny God's existence with your life." God's love strives for spiritual integrity.

As it incarnates in the world before our eyes, what we should see is life because the aim of God's love is life, never death. God's Son, the epitome of love, came into the world "that we might live through him" as God's atoning sacrifice, the Savior of the world. If we abide in love, we abide in God and "God lives in us." Love helps us live in God and without it, we are trying to live on our own, which is really no life at all. God's love is so strong with life it overcomes our death and destroys it. "Many waters cannot quench love; neither can floods drown it" nor death destroy it. God's love is the lifeline for the world and God gave us a future through the resurrection because love never fails.

Love never stops. This is why when the chapel building closes, we will still be open to God because Jesus is alive with love. I would hate to think what it would be like if God wasn't love. If God wasn't love, Jesus would have never been born savior of the world. If God wasn't love, we wouldn't even be here now because love birthed us into the world and we are children of the light and love. If God wasn't love, I would have hung up my

ordination papers a long time ago and seek to make some real money. If God wasn't love, the music of the world would fall silent and the only harmony we would hear would sound like hell. If God wasn't love this coming year, as the Duke Magazine wrongly stated, we would be "closed for business." But because God is love and love is let loose in the world by the power of the Spirit of Jesus, this building may be closed for renovation, but we, the people of Duke Chapel, will still be open to the love of God in Jesus Christ.

In the upcoming presidential primary season, we will be on a holy campaign for the love of God for God is love and we are called to love one another as a sign that God lives in us. Love is the church's vocation and mission. This fruit of the Spirit, love, is what builds up a church and causes it to grow (Ephes 4). Love builds up. The Chapel building will be under renovation soon but the Chapel community, the people, is always under construction, being built up in love as we build each other up in love, to be better and stronger than ever before. Love will build Duke Chapel even without a physical building because love is free and shared from heart to heart.

Love is the deep and wide ocean of God's embrace, which is always other-wise, directed outward to the world. The statement of Richard Rohr on our strategic plan says, "To build your house well is, ironically, to be nudged beyond its doors." Love compels Duke Chapel to go beyond our doors, to be a church without walls grounded in Christ who has torn down the walls of division between us. The love of God calls us to be a great loving church that has no fear of the future for fear is not in the DNA of God's love. Love casts out fear because fear can erode love and stunt the work God wants to do in and through us. The world won't change by going to church; the world will change by being the church, the loving body of Christ in the world. Duke Chapel is on the move because the love of God is moving through the living Christ. And if Christ is alive, and the church is the body of Christ, the church is alive and well.

So as we look ahead, I'm reminded of what someone said: "If you want to go fast, go alone; if you want to go far, go together." Jimmy Durante was one of the great entertainers in the 20th century; one of his nicknames was the great Schnozzola, referring to his nose. He was asked to be a part of a show for World War II veterans. He told them his schedule was very busy so he could afford only a few minutes and do one short monologue and then immediately leave for his next appointment. The show's director agreed and was happy that he was coming even with his busy schedule. When Jimmy got on stage, something interesting happened. He performed his short monologue but then he stayed. The applause grew louder and louder and he kept staying. 15, 20, then 30 minutes went by. Finally, he took his last bow and left the stage. Someone backstage stopped him and said, "I thought you had to go after a few minutes. What happened?" Jimmy answered, "I did have to go, but I can show you the reason I stayed. You can see for yourself if you'll look down on the front row." He pointed to the front row and in the front row were two men, each of whom had lost an arm in the war. One had lost his right arm and the other had lost his left. But together, they were able to clap, and that's exactly what they were doing, loudly and cheerfully.

Together they were able to clap. Together they were cheerful. Together, they made a team. Together they didn't focus on what they lost. Together they focused on what they had. Together we're able to be the body of Christ in the world. An eye, arm, hand, leg, foot, ear, nose—together we form Christ's body of love. Together we can be the great loving church of our great loving God, serving our loving resurrected Christ. So let us walk together children and don't you get weary. Work together, brothers and sisters, in love, because God is love and God is with us and will be with us as we journey on this road less traveled. We may be without this building for a year or so, but we will never be without God's love. God's love travels.

Pathways students, thank you for leading us back to the heart of God and the gospel of Jesus Christ with that one word—love. May this campus, community, nation, and world, know we are Christians by our love.