

Love that motivates (1 John 5:1-6)

# **1 John says the love of God comes first. Oh. Right.**

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I love the social action of my church. I grew up singing, “They will know we are Christians by our love, by our love, yes, they’ll knooooow we are Christians by our love.” There was, to my knowledge, no one *but* Christians where I grew up, so it was a bit of a non sequitur. But we sang it proudly at camp, at youth group, in girls’ groups.

Little did I know what a different world it would be when I’d live and move and have my being as an adult: that I would choose a divinity school that could teach me respectfully about other religions, that I’d become lunching friends with a rabbi, that my children would go to school with kids who had no idea what it meant that their mother read the Bible for a living.

I love the social action of my church. Ironing my clergy shirt for another rally, flying a rainbow flag at Pride, welcoming refugees. I love my people, and I know they love me.

And yet: we disappoint one another. We are not as strong as we hoped. We show up but forget the words to the song. We study but overlook the local pertinence. We lean on each other, but the energies run thin. The two-steps-forward, one-step-back nature of social justice has us treading on each other’s toes. Time sucks the vigor; lassitude eats the momentum. The get-up-and-go gets up and goes away.

Into this life of love waltzes John, with his letter fluttering ahead of us in the parade, words to summon the dance. “By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and obey his commandments.”

The love of God comes first. Oh, right.

It can be difficult to see love for God. Yes, we sing it in heritage hymns, and we pray it for invalids, but love for God is more difficult to see when we’re measuring our faith by our love for humankind. It matters in humankind; it is flesh and blood truth incarnate—but that’s not the depth of it. The depth of it is measured in something beyond our sight, beyond our energies, a longitude that stretches way beyond our days and a latitude that reaches beyond our ken. Jesus may be human, but there’s more to God’s love than the love between people.

It’s love for God that motivates us beyond our imperfect, fragile, human faithfulness. When I’m drained it is love for God that energizes me. Well, first it’s love for God in which I rest. Then it’s love for God in which I worship, awe in my heart and head. Next love for God joins me to the community who love the commandments, the commandments that are no longer burdensome because they are God’s. Later love for God takes me into and beyond my work, beyond what I can do and see, even beyond what I can do and see together with you, you beloved who are fabulous and capable and committed. “For the love of God is this, that we obey his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome.”