

One Thing Remains

Rev. Cara Morgan

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In the first season of the TV series *Once Upon a Time*, an entire community of fairy-tale characters has been cursed. Each of them no longer remembers who they are and the entire community has been transported to “a land without magic” – specifically, to a town named Storybrooke, Maine.

In the series, it is expressed repeatedly that true love’s kiss is the most powerful magic in the world. In fact, true love’s kiss is the only known magic that can break the curse that brought the characters to this world. To this end, the main characters work throughout the series to bring Snow White and Prince Charming together romantically. But, in the final episode of the series, all hope seems lost. Snow White and Prince Charming have gone separate ways, with Prince Charming on his way out of town. Evil seems to be winning. And, an eleven-year-old boy named Henry lies dying in a hospital bed after eating a poisoned apple (really – I’m not making this up).

The curse is broken in the most unexpected of ways! The series turns our understanding of love and our understanding of what constitutes power on its head; in the end, the love that a mother has for her son is the most powerful magic in the world, and a mother’s kiss frees each and every one of the fairytale characters, good or evil.

In the same way, 1 John 4:7-21 takes what could be considered the most trite of subjects – love, and turns it on its head. Love is not some weak, mushy, mealy-mouthed emotion. It is not the popularized version of romantic love that we see in Hollywood, or that we celebrated in a commercialized holiday a couple of weeks ago. Love, when it comes to God, is powerful, and it is enacted. 1 John states: “*This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.*” Love starts with God, and love is the very definition of who God is. God’s powerful love is put into action – it is shown in sending Jesus Christ to Earth to live, die, and be resurrected among us.

In a well-known Indian fable, six blind men find an elephant. None of them has ever experienced an elephant before. Because they cannot see, they spread out, each feeling the elephant to experience it. One feels the side of the elephant, stating that an elephant is like a wall; one feels the trunk of the elephant and announces that an elephant is like a snake. A third feels the ear of the elephant, and is convinced that an elephant is like a fan. Another man feels the leg of an elephant, and states that an

elephant is like a tree. Still another feels the tail, and thinks that an elephant is like a rope. The last blind man feels the elephant's tusk, and is certain an elephant is like a spear.

Sometimes, I think of the Bible as a document that describes God through God's relationship with God's people through multiple ages. In this way, we experience God through the Bible in the same way that the group of blind men experience an elephant. We get images of a God that creates, provides, saves, sustains in the Bible; but also images of a God that judges, punishes, and destroys. We piece together each of these actions and images and get the full picture – in this way, we can “see” God after putting these images together. I think we end up *understanding* God about as well as the blind men can visualize their elephant – after all, many of the images and actions of God, in our limited human understanding, don't seem to jive with one another.

BUT, it could be argued, and it *should* be argued that love as a defining characteristic of God is one of the most essential “parts of the elephant,” as it were. 1 John 4 is among the clearest explanations of how inextricable the connection between God and love truly is, but it is not even *close* to the only Scripture to discuss the love of God! Consider these examples from both the Old and New Testament:

- Exodus 34: 6 “the LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness”
This phrase is repeated throughout the OT – in the law, writings, and prophets. It becomes an essential statement of belief in the one God to the Hebrew people
- Psalm 33:5 “the Earth is full of God's unfailing love” (NIV)
In fact, the Psalms discuss God's unfailing love dozens of times!
- Romans 8:38-39 “[Nothing] in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord”
- Galatians 5:6 “The only thing that counts is faith working through love”
- Ephesians 3:18-19 “How wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love surpasses all knowledge” (NIV)

I'm out of breath! It's a little overwhelming, isn't it? Love seems like such a simple thing, but the sheer breadth and depth of God's love is awe-inspiring. And God's love is never passive – it is a love that is literally *defined* by God's reconciling actions in Jesus Christ. It is a love that reached out to us, bridging the gap between humanity and God. It's a love that completely transformed humanity's understanding of God from a far-off force to Emmanuel – God with us.

As Christians, though, we cannot stop at simply stepping back and marveling. We cannot simply believe in God; or pray a prayer; or even passively love God back. We are called to be a part of God's love. And when we share in God's love, this doesn't end with us loving God! Yes, God loves us and we return that love. But, if we do not extend that love to others, 1 John says – in almost ridiculously harsh language -- that we are *liars* and we do not know God!

1 John was written to a very conflicted, broken community. At least two factions *within* the community were arguing about the essentials of what it meant to be a Christian. We're not sure exactly what point they were arguing, but many scholars believe they were debating the very divinity of Christ. This conflict was dividing God's people; engendering much fear from within the community.

It is hard not to draw connections to the world we live in; to churches we've all seen and experienced, to entire denominations that have been torn apart by infighting, and, yes, to our very conflicted state and nation! In our world, fear and hate sometimes seem to be winning, and we sometimes feel powerless when we consider exactly how divided we are.

In a classic quote, the pastoral theologian William Sloane Coffin states: "the opposite of love is not hate, but fear." And, from a very different source, the character Yoda from Star Wars states that "Fear is the path to the dark side. Fear leads to anger. Anger leads to hate. Hate leads to suffering." The connection between hate and fear seems obvious, both in our world and in the world of 1 John. In fact, in the Johannite community, the Christians were turning on each other to such a degree that many of them were individually doubting their status as Christians because of it.

But 1 John has a solution: "There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love." Instead of separating from and judging "those people," instead of creating even more insular communities, 1 John argues that because God has loved us through actions in our very world, we must love one another, even those we disagree with, in both our words and actions. Hate and fear are not the answer. In fact, in the life of a true follower of Christ, hate and fear have no place. And it is the love we have for God and one another that will enable us to overcome the fear that separates us.

And, yes, none of us are perfect Christians. None of us can completely avoid fear and hate; none of us have perfect love for one another. But that is where the God we serve, the very definition of perfect and enacted love, steps in. God's love is always

powerful enough to change us; it is powerful enough to cast out our fear; it is powerful enough to enable us, as imperfect humans, to extend love to one another. In fact, according to 1 John, true love for God always ends with love for others; for, after all, how can we love God, whom we have not seen, if we do not love our brothers and sisters, whom we have seen?

Let us pray:

God who is the very definition of love,

Help us to choose love this week. Perfect our love for each other, and empower us to love those who we don't understand and those that we do outside of these walls. Help us to remember that, no matter how powerful hate and fear feel to us, your love is more powerful. Let us participate in that love more and more, as we continue to learn to love you, each other, and each person we encounter in our daily lives.

Amen.