

Columbia, Missouri
The Worship of God • September 4, 2022



THE SCRIPTURE
1 John 4:17-21 (*The Message*)

*God is love. When we take up permanent residence in a life of love, we live in God and God lives in us. This way, love has the run of the house, **becomes at home and mature in us**, so that we're free of worry on Judgment Day—our standing in the world is identical with Christ's. There is no room in love for fear. Well-formed love banishes fear. **Since fear is crippling, a fearful life—fear of death, fear of judgment—is one not yet fully formed in love.** We, though, are going to love—love and be loved. First, we were loved, now we love. He loved us first. **If anyone boasts, "I love God," and goes right on hating his brother or sister, thinking nothing of it, he is a liar.** If he won't love the person he can see, how can he love the God he can't see? The command we have from **Christ is blunt: Loving God includes loving people.** You've got to love both.*

THE MESSAGE
“Then Sings My Soul: One”
Mark Briley

[Editor’s Note: It would be helpful to listen to “One” by U2. Follow this link https://drive.google.com/file/d/10TX99D9wNmstFtSJo4_FVnWYgCUkhBMn/view]

God is love. If you want a Scripture to memorize, I would offer 1 John 4:17 as a great place to start. In fact, you can say it now and nail this memorization exercise on the first try. Repeat after me: *God is love.* [repeat] Now say it again without me prompting you first. [*God is love.*]. See? You’ve just memorized 1 John 4:17 and I’m pretty sure you’ll never forget it.

Oh, but we do, don’t we? Not the words so much. We remember the words. We memorize the words. *Ice, Ice, Baby* by Vanilla Ice came on at the Mizzou game on Thursday night and there I am, right back in it to win it 1990s style – “*Alright stop, collaborate and listen.*” I look at Carrie and I’m like, “*What is happening?*”

We memorize words and many times; they never leave us. And those were days some 32 years ago when you had to memorize the lyrics by actually listening to them over and over – unless you still had the sleeve from the cassette tape. You couldn’t just hit up the Googles in a second and have the full lyric there. You had to really listen. And... it’s why many of us memorized them slightly wrong because we couldn’t always hear the words clearly enough. *God is love.* 1 John 4:17. You got it?

And we’re shooting for soul memory here more than language regurgitation. What does “*God is love*” mean for your soul? How does it impact your living? We’re diving into this complexity today... this Labor Day weekend... and this final installment of our *Then Sings My Soul* series as we’ve sought after sacred hope in secular music. Perhaps the most famous rock band of all time, U2¹, is our companion for today’s journey. Do you know why they call themselves U2? I don’t either.



¹ u2.com. While there are countless stories about U2, here is their official website which can guide you into the stories as they tell them in their own ways.

Bono, The Edge, Adam, and Larry met as students at a Dublin, Ireland school designed to serve the Protestant population of northern Dublin. The school motto? *All Different, All Equal*. How 'bout that? Larry Mullen, a budding drummer put out an ad at the school for anyone interested in forming a band. Five students responded. Two quickly bailed, and the other three, along with Larry, became U2 – just like that. Can you imagine? You never know, kids! In pulling the group together, Larry said, “*For about ten minutes, we were The Larry Mullen Band. Then Bono walked in and blew any chance I had of being in charge.*”

They first called themselves *Feedback* but after winning a battle of the bands contest, a buddy came up with a new list of names for the band to choose from. They picked U2 because it was vague, and they disliked it the least.

Bono got his nickname from a surrealist art gang of sorts called Lypton Village. They had a ritual of giving nicknames, and the name given young Paul David Hewson was Bono Vox of O’Connell Street, which eventually was shortened to Bono Vox – a Latin derived name of a hearing-aid shop on O’Connell Street. The Latin derivative means “*Good Voice.*” Bono disliked it at first but learning the meaning, he warmed up to it and... he’s been Bono since he was 14. At this young age, he met his future wife and his lifelong bandmates all at same time. Did you have your whole life direction pegged at 14? A spiritually curious person, the impact of the Christian faith especially – the person of Jesus – molded Bono and the kind of music he would write. He wouldn’t write hymnody per say, but his lyrics got at the angst of the human experience and this quest to live out what is meant in 1 John 4:17 – “*God is love.*” Say “*God is love.*” You still got it.

The band’s fame blossomed out of Dublin, throughout Ireland and Europe and, of course, the United States where their albums *The Joshua Tree* and *Rattle and Hum* rocked the late '80s, making them mega-super-stars. But like most things, people shift, change, grow, evolve, and so was the band’s music – not always to the agreement of each member of the band. As they were working on their next album, things weren’t gelling well and there was frustration to the point that the guys said, “*This may be it for the band.*”

They wind up in a studio in Berlin in October 1990, flying into town the day the Cold War ended, and Germany officially reunited. Even with that to inspire them, the songs weren’t coming together. The visions were varied. But then The Edge combines a couple of riffs on the guitar, and Bono starts improvising a melody, and it was 15 minutes of magic that created this song called simply, *One*, that *Rolling Stone* ranks as their greatest song from their more than 40 years as a band. Axl Rose, lead rocker of *Guns ‘N’ Roses*, wept the first time he heard it... and that’s saying something. As some have come to say, there’s the “*bass, drums, three chords, and the truth.*”

The studio was alive, and the band knew it. The Edge said, “*Oh great! This album has finally started. It’s the reason you’re in a band – when the Spirit descends upon you, and you create something truly affective.*” Drummer Larry said of the moment: “*It was the reminder that everything was **not** broken.*”

Do you have those breakthrough moments in your relationships? Those moments where you’re like, “*Yes! **This** is why we do what we do. **This** is who we are. **This** is what we’re about!*” It’s exhilarating.

Bono said, “*The words fell out of the sky as a gift. We had a request from the Dalai Lama to participate in the festival called Oneness. I love and respect the Dalai Lama,*” he said, “*but there was something a little bit ‘let’s hold hands’ hippie to me about this particular event. I am in awe of the Tibetan position on non-violence, but this event didn’t strike a chord. I sent him back a note saying, ‘One – but not the same.’* Which becomes an iconic line in the song and... if you remember... not too far from the school motto of their youth: “*All different. All equal.*”

And herein lays the tension of this song and all our lives really. As Bono says about great songs, “*They have some kind of tension – the bitter and the sweet balanced perfectly.*” He describes how the song is not about oneness as much as it’s about difference. “*It’s anti-romantic in this way,*” he continues. “*We’re one, but we’re not the same. We get to carry each other.*” Bono is still disappointed when people hear the chorus line as “*We’ve **got** to*” instead of “*We **get** to carry each other.*” We get to do this. It’s hard work and relationships can be hard to navigate, but this is the *get-to* before us. Jesus was all about this and it made people every kind of uncomfortable. He was the epitome of the mature working-out of what it means to love in real life. Jesus is the “*is*” in the Scripture I’ve asked you to memorize today: “*God is love.*” Say it again! 1 John 4:17. Jesus is the link of those two epic realities, God and love, bringing them together in one.

We’re using Eugene Peterson’s translation of Scripture today as we have several times in this series. Peterson is in the resurrection now, but he left us this gift, among others, of putting Scripture in plain words that hit home in new and fresh ways while staying amazingly true to the spirit of the original biblical languages. It is most fitting to utilize The Message² translation today, as it had a tremendous impact on Bono himself. Bono was well enough versed in Scripture and the ways of Jesus, but reading *The Message* translation brought it home for him in some incredible ways. It was so moving to him that he found a way to get Eugene Peterson’s phone number, and he called the theologian out of the blue one day to thank him for his illumination of the biblical text.

² The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language. Eugene Peterson. 2002. Navpress. Colorado Springs.



The great thing is that when Peterson answers the phone and the voice on the other end says, *“Hello Dr. Peterson, this is Bono,”* Peterson has no idea who Bono is³. This is 2016. Bono was the biggest rock star on the planet. Anyway – eventually, Bono ends up at Peterson’s modest breakfast table, and they strike up a friendship. And at 85 years old, just a short time before

Peterson passes from this life, he attends his first U2 concert to learn what his new friend, Bono, does with his life.

This idea of *“God is love”* as we find in 1 John 4:17 is played over and over in the epistles of John because Eugene Peterson says, *“We can’t work out this love with ourselves and our neighbors all that well much of the time.”* Specifically, he writes, *“The two most difficult things to get straight in life are love and God. More often than not,”* he says, *“the mess people make of their lives can be traced to failure or stupidity or meanness in one or both of those areas.”*

And so... as disciples of Jesus, we are to work at maturing our love along the way. That is our task. And a well-formed love begins to do its healing work in ourselves and in our neighbors as well. *“Well-formed love banishes fear,”* says our text for today. And fear is crippling. A fearful life is one not yet fully formed in love. We tend to note that other people are not very mature in their efforts to love. We note the pettiness in others; the selfishness, the scarcity mentality based in fear. But John writes to these churches that are struggling with that very reality and says, *“If you’re boasting about how much you love God but go right on hating your brother or sister, you’re a big fat liar.”* And we’ve got all our “buts” at the ready. *“But you don’t know them. But they are this. They are that.”* Yep. I know. I feel those same things at times. We start working that out as our love matures. And that tends to come with asking many questions and learning to truly listen to the responses of those around us.

Every verse of U2’s famed song we rally around today, begins with a question. *“Is it getting better?” “Did I disappoint you?” “Have you come here for forgiveness?” “Did I ask too much?”* Bono knows that love doesn’t come easily. It’s why we often speak of something being *“a labor of love.”* Jesus knew love was an effort. He was willing to die in love’s name. It may be why he bypassed the more than 600 laws when asked which law was most important and simply said, *“Love God. Love people.”* It was as if we could just get that right, everything else would fall in its rightful place. And if it were simple, we’d have this conquered by now.

³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-140S5e90KY>. Watch this great twenty-minute piece on the Psalms featuring Eugene Peterson and Bono.

Bono speaks to this in a book the band wrote together called, *U2 by U2*. He writes...

“Your nature is a hard thing to change; it takes time. One of the extraordinary transferences that happen in your spiritual life is not that your character flaws go away but they start to work for you. A negative becomes a positive: you’ve a big mouth: you end up a singer. You’re insecure: you end up a performer who needs applause. I have heard of people having life-changing, miraculous turnarounds, people set free from addiction after a single prayer, relationships saved where both parties ‘Let go and let God.’ But it was not like that for me. For all that ‘I was lost, I am found,’ it is probably more accurate to say, ‘I was really lost, I’m a little less so at the moment.’ And then a little less and a little less again. That, to me, is the spiritual life. The slow reworking and rebooting of a computer at regular intervals, reading the small print of the service manual. It has slowly rebuilt me in a better image. It has taken years, though, and it is not over yet.”⁴

What’s not over yet for you? When it comes to your walk with Christ... how are you still maturing in love?

Our Broadway friend who submitted this song for the series says he’s still working at love too. *“I would like to consider myself as someone who is open to differences in people and ideas, but it seems like in the world of social media, people are more able to find others who share and amplify their points of view, and are more likely to turn against others because those people ‘watch the lamestream media’ or are ‘Fox News aficionados’. We live in a world where you can follow your beliefs down a rabbit hole. It is easy to get validation for almost any point of view and that seems to be polarizing our society. I think that this song asks you to look beyond the cover of the book to see what is at the core, and that love is the key to doing that.”*

He goes on to say that this is the core of what Jesus did. He didn’t look at society’s labels for people – he was quite clear, actually, that the labels meant nothing to him. He went out of his way to connect with the people who were at the edges of society no matter what his family or friends or the power structure had to say about those people. *God is love* (period). 1 John 4:17.

U2 sold this song with proceeds to help fight the AIDS epidemic. Through the sales and work of Bono’s ONE Campaign, more than 650 million dollars has been given for AIDS treatment and prevention in Africa. In 2020, the band donated all their take



⁴ U2 by U2. This book written by members of the band came out in 2005, published by a division of Harper Collins.

home pay for the year – some 11 million dollars to help provide hospitals across the Emerald Isle with support to pay their doctors, nurses, and staffs. They are not just memorizing the scripture, “*God is love.*” They are trying to live it. “*I want it all, and I want it now,*” says Bono about working toward social justice initiatives. “*Heaven on earth – now – let’s have a bit of that. My idea of Christianity,*” he goes on, “*is no safety net, a scathing attack on bourgeois values, and a risk to respectability.*”

What will you risk “*in the name of Love*” to quote another U2 song? Could you imagine approaching a single person this week – someone different from you – not your bestie, not your social circle, not your easy to relate to colleague – but someone for whom you are to be One but are definitely not the same. Could you do something kind for them? Your own little part in a one-but-not-the-same, global movement toward unity?

In the 30 years since the song’s release, Bono has often sung the song with an extra verse generally known as the “*Hear Us Coming*” verse. The lyrics to the extra verse go something like:

***You hear us coming Lord?
You hear us call?
You hear us knocking, knocking at Your door?
You hear us coming, Lord?
You hear us call?
You hear us scratching, will You make me crawl?***

When performed live, the band often rolls right from there into a verse of *Amazing Grace* ... which pulls us back, perhaps to where this whole series started. Your own personal Jesus.

Do you remember? From grace to unhindered love – we’ve traveled with the music of the people. You submitted these songs; and so many good ones we couldn’t work into a nine-week series. Perhaps we’ll bring it back again at some point. For now... just relish in the presence of the Spirit of God that is present everywhere we turn.

When you turn on your radio, your music streaming app, or you hear a song play as you shop for groceries – will you listen with new ears? Will you hear the grace of God everywhere? And will you relish in the growth of your own spirit and that of those with whom we share this space today? Recall often your memory verse for today. “*God is love.*” 1 John 4:17. It’s more than lip service. The future is calling us to the hard labor of Love... may we be courageous enough to follow its lead...

May it be so.

[Editor's Note: It will be helpful to play this video clip at the conclusion of reading this message:

https://drive.google.com/file/d/10TX99D9wNmstFtSJo4_FVnWYgCUkhBMn/view]

BROAD HEARTS BROAD MINDS BROAD REACH