



Roanoke, Virginia

January 29, 2022

“The Provoking Smile”

I John 4:7-21

George C. Anderson

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. ¹⁰ In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. 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 abides in us, and his love is perfected in us.

¹³ By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit. ¹⁴ And we have seen and do testify that the Father has sent his Son as the Savior of the world. ¹⁵ God abides in those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God, and they abide in God. ¹⁶ So we have known and believe the love that God has for us.

God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. ¹⁷ Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness on the day of judgment, because as he is, so are we in this world. ¹⁸ 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. ¹⁹ We love because he first loved us. ²⁰ Those who say, “I love God,” and hate a brother or sister are liars, for those who do not love a brother or sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen. ²¹ The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.



I wish a baby was being baptized this morning. On Thursday, while studying the passage I just read, I found myself wanting to talk about baptism. I couldn't save the passage and sermon for Feb 12 when Abbott Roseman will be baptized because the bulletin deadline was already past... *and* Ben is scheduled to preach that day. But I wish family timing and the Holy Spirit had cooperated and there had been a baptism scheduled for today because since Thursday, I have been thinking about infant baptism in a new way. I have been thinking about it as *God's smile*.

Think about what a parent usually does after
a doctor,
or nurse,
or midwife

first places the baby in the parent's arms.

Think about what happens when the parent first sets eyes and lays hands
on the one who will from that day forth be known
as that parent's son or daughter.

The parent smiles.

Maybe through tears,
but the parent smiles.

The baby doesn't know what that smile means.

The son doesn't know he already has staked a claim in the parent's heart.

It means nothing to the daughter that she already has a parent's love.

The parent smiles because it is a moment of affixation.

The parent's heart was ready to affix itself to this child's face
and to this child's life.

The smile is the expression of love for the child,
before the child can love in return.

And so it goes for a while. With each of our three daughters, and then a granddaughter, Millie and I kept smiling at a baby who did not smile back. With the granddaughter, we were joining Virginia. Multiple times a day, each girl had to put up with having her view completely taken up by one of our faces

making silly cooing noises that meant nothing
but meant something at the same time;
and see a smile that said nothing
though something was said.

"Ba, ba, ba, ba, baaaaaa; boo, boo, boooooo. Brrrrrrrrrrr.

These performances were free of charge. The baby owed us nothing.

But then, one day, it happens. The baby smiles back. The child's smile is awakened by the parent's smile. With most babies it takes weeks for this to happen, but with Emory it seemed to take only days. That child is not a prodigy in other ways, but with smiling, she has skipped some grades.



The parent's smile teaches the child to smile.
The parent's love invites the child to love.

Isn't this what the passage says?
Isn't this what infant baptism says?

No disrespect to those churches that wait for a buy-in from the child,
that want the one baptized to meet God at least some of the way
by making some kind of profession of faith.
I know how wonderful adult baptisms can be,
and to each church their own,
but there is something powerful,
important,
and truly glorious
about the fundamental truth illumined by the baptism of a child
whose attention can be grabbed by water being poured in a bowl
or running down the face,
but who has no idea what the water means.
Before we love,
we are loved.
Before we can claim God,
God claims us.

“[We love because God first loved us,](#)” says our passage.

Adult baptism doesn't deny that truth, but adult baptism does what our passage does and say a bit more about just how far God's love will go. I remember Mia Copeland's baptism. That's an interesting story. Mia already was heavily involved in the church and has been a leader in our church. So, her baptism didn't come out of a dramatic experience of someone turning their life over to God after getting to the end of sin's rope. Nevertheless, Mia was asked, “[Do you accept that you are a sinner, saved by the grace of God?](#)” That question reminds us that God's love smiles even as we are in whatever spiritual equivalent there is of terrible twos, adolescent rebellion, or those times when parents still love their children after tempers are lost and before apologies are made. The passage speaks of God's love shining in Jesus, and then tells us that this love atones for sins. “Atonement” is not a popular word these days, but it basically means “doing the work.” Jesus did the selfless and sacrificial work of repairing damage done.

And then comes the shift in the passage. Jesus does the work for us, and then does the work through us.

God's smile invites us to smile. “[Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love.](#)” Yes, love God in return, but that means loving others..., for loving God means nothing, the passage says; without loving others.



We are smiled upon so we can learn to smile. We are loved, so we will then know how to love. That is what the passage says, and that is what infant baptism says.

It begins with, God first loves us.

- Whit Ashburn did not understand why water was dripping down his head. But the truth of God's love was declared.
- Camden Brannan didn't know what was being said when Ben and Valerie said, "We do," and the congregation said, "We do" and "We will." He did not understand that promises were made to raise him to know the truth of God's love so he will learn how to love rightly.

Maddox Kozlowski didn't understand why kids dressed like John the Baptist, Mary, Joseph, a wise man and an angel were talking to him or what they were saying, but as I said then on Christmas Eve, if Maddox's parents and congregation keep their promises, he'll grow up to get it.

He will grow up to get it because while he can't directly see God smiling, he can see God smile through others. He will see God's smile

in his parents praying with him and teaching him—

better yet, *showing* him

the habits of kindness and respect.

He will see God's smile in being part of a community of God-worshippers and Jesus-followers

being a part of a congregation that not only teaches him but shows him

what it is like to worship, learn and serve together.

These habits of faith will be like the habits of athletes

in that by their practices he has a real chance

of becoming what he practices.

He will grow up and have a real chance

at learning how to love others as he has been loved,

and thus become a way that God smiles in the world.

I'll tell you what inspired these thoughts on Thursday. While studying our passage, I was reading the wonderful book Rev. Ernie Thompson recommended at this year's Trent Get-Away Retreat. In *You Are What You Love; The Spiritual Power of Habit*, James Smith, says this of our passage:

"He first loved us'- is the provoking smile of a Creator who meets us in the flesh, granting even the grace that allows us to love him in return."

Smith then quotes Swiss theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar who said,

"...just as no child can be awakened to love without being loved, so too no human heart can come to an understanding of God without the free gift of God's grace."



And then Smith goes on to make the critically important point that our passage makes. While we can take God's smile for granted, we cannot take for granted that the child will smile back.

Our hearts are wired to love. They need objects for their devotion. John Calvin put it this way: "Our hearts are idol factories." He's right. He's right even about the hearts of those who don't believe in God, because hearts have to adhere to something if life is going to make any sense at all. Whether it is power for power's sake, money for money's sake, sex for the sake of sex, a high for the sake of the high, selfishness for the sake of the self, our hearts seek idols because we are going to love something.

Hearts will love, but that does not mean that they will love what God loves. That does not mean that they will love justice and mercy, that they will love compassion and kindness, that they will love seeing others besides themselves flourish in life, or that they understand how beautiful it is when enemies reconcile.

The trick is to put ourselves in position where we might see the smile that can provoke the same sort of smile in return. We need to habitually put ourselves in places where we learn, see, and practice what God's love is like. We worship over and over again so that we truly love the one we worship. We return to the stories of faith again and again until they become the stories we live. We practice selfless acts till we learn how to be selfless, we act with kindness so we can learn to be kind, we practice apologies until we mean them, and we practice forgiving until we become forgiving people.

Parents who want to raise good, kind, children want this to happen at home. They want their children to grow up in a household of acceptance and support. They want their children to know they have a place to come home to even when they have done something embarrassing, failed at something, or did something wrong. Sometimes those who lead families are so good at this that they trick themselves into believing that the family is all the child needs.

Even though their children eventually will leave home.

Even though children will let others in their lives
whom they may not love as much as their parents,
but to whom they will listen and believe.

Even though at life's end, parents may someday become like children again
who can receive the smile but no longer able to show it.

Even though life inevitably is lived in communities that are bigger than families;
communities that can do far more damage
and far more good
than families ever can.

God needs more than families.

God needs communities that know how to love as God has loved us...
who seek justice,
love kindness,
and protect those who cannot protect themselves.



Because that is the point about God's love, our passage says. God's love for us can be counted on. Because God's love can be counted on, there is nothing to fear. But we don't know God's love unless we love as God loves us. For the wonderful affirmation of our passage comes with the harsh reminder that if we say we love God who loves us, but do not show that love to others, then our faith is in vain. "Those who say, 'I love God,' and hate... are liars," is how the passage so harshly puts it. I would add that churches that preach God's love but practice hate are telling their own kind of lies. And the world doesn't need lies in the name of God. The world needs God's love, and all the justice and reconciliation that is God's love..., or the world is lost.

So, shall we not put ourselves in a position where we can recognize God's smile? Let's put ourselves in places where habits reveal God's smile:

Where we will regularly worship the intended object of our heart's desire,
Where we will regularly hear and tell the stories of God among us.

And let's remember that we do so with a purpose; that we be those who love as God loves us... that we can be in the world in a way that is like Jesus was in the world, and thus be a community that smiles in the world by making a witness for what is good, and right and decent. Let us practice the habits of love so we can learn to love what we practice. We might even become what we practice.

