

Circle of Love
[1 John 4:7-21](#)
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The Vancouver Canucks are in the Stanley Cup Playoffs, and that's both a good thing, and a bad thing. See, I've been a Canucks fan for a long time, and for most of that time, they haven't been very good. Most seasons, they've lost more games than they've won, and if they make it to the playoffs, they haven't gone very far. And that's fine – really, it's probably better that way. If you don't get your hopes up, if your expectations stay low, you can't be disappointed when the team you love eventually fails. Twice in my life, the Canucks have had an incredible run to the Stanley Cup Finals – first in 1994, and then in 2011, and both those years were incredibly exciting, and then incredibly heartbreaking when, both times, they lost in Game Seven of the Finals, and the whole city rioted. Those years hurt because I cared so much about the team winning – I was so invested, so committed, I really, truly believed that they had a chance to win it all, so when they came so close and then failed, it almost made it worse than if they'd never made it that far to begin with. And that's what worries me about this year – every game they win, every step closer they get, I'm afraid of the disappointment and pain that's waiting for me when they eventually lose. I know

Tennyson said that it's better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all, but I'm pretty sure Tennyson wasn't a Canucks fan.

That's the trouble with love – as soon as you love something or someone, it makes you vulnerable. Love opens you up to potential hurt and pain and loss, because you can't be sure that love will last, you can't control all the variables, you can't guarantee that things will end well, for you or for what you love. And if that's true of something as silly and inconsequential as a hockey team, it's also true of far more important things. Loving our family, our friends, our spouses, our children, all that love makes you vulnerable; it exposes you to danger and uncertainty and fear – as soon as you love someone, you are putting yourself at risk. The writer Elizabeth Stone said that deciding to have a child is to 'decide forever to have your heart go walking around outside your body', and really, that's true of any loving relationship – the more you love someone, the more exposed you are to potential pain, the more fear you have that one day, you might lose what you deeply love.

And I think all too often, we think that's true of the love we have for God. We gather together at church every week, and we sing about how much we love God, we read about love in the Bible, we talk about love in our prayers, we all know that there is nothing more important than to Love the Lord your God with

all your heart, all your mind, all your strength. And we know that Jesus said, if you love me, keep my commandments, and we've read in John's letter to the church that if we love God, we should love our neighbours, our brothers and sisters around us – because how can we call ourselves God's people if we don't love the people around us? So we try our best to love each other as best we can, to love our family and friends, our spouses and children, our fellow church members, and all the strangers and neighbours we meet every day, even our enemies. And even though we try, it isn't easy. It's hard to love your children when they're driving you up the wall – it's hard to love your neighbour when they've just taken the Costco parking spot that you were clearly waiting for first, it's hard to love the people responsible for all the terror and pain and suffering all around the world. But then we start to worry – if we can't love our neighbours – if we find it hard to love the people around us, even the people closest to us, are we really loving God? How can we be sure we're actually God's people when we find it so hard to get along with all the rest of God's people around us? How can we be sure that when we one day stand in God's presence, there won't be a big crowd of people just waiting to tell God all the times we were cruel and impatient and uncaring and selfish to them, all the times we failed to show love, and then the next thing you know we're tossed out into the outer darkness, where there is

weeping and gnashing of teeth? Loving God, loving others, it makes us vulnerable, it exposes us to potential pain and danger and trouble – and every time we open our hearts to love, we're afraid of what might happen, what we might lose, what we might suffer. If we open our hearts or our homes to someone in need, how do we know they can be trusted? If we speak up to defend someone who's being attacked, how do we know we won't be next? It is so much easier to just withdraw, to close ourselves off from the world around us, to give in to our fear and turn away from God, turn away from love.

And that's not the life God wants for us. That's not the love that Jesus Christ wants us to experience. When John writes to the church, he knows that loving others isn't easy. That's why when he talks about love, he doesn't start with our love for one another, or our love for God. He starts with God's love for us. All love is from God, because God is love – and God's love is revealed for us in Jesus Christ, God's only Son entering into this world so that we might live through him. In Jesus Christ, God became vulnerable – in Jesus Christ, God chose to experience pain and heartache and rejection and death – God willingly decided to love humanity even in the midst of rebellion, even in the very moment we were nailing his hands and feet to the cross, the love of Jesus Christ for us never faltered, never failed. We cannot define or measure love based on our actions,

our behaviour, because we will never get the whole picture, we will never truly understand what love is until we look at God, God's love for us, God's love for the world. And that love never ends. That love never fails. God's love can never be disappointed, it can never be lost, because it is inexhaustible, it is stronger than our sin, stronger than death.

And once we truly understand that – that there is no end to God's love for us, that there is nothing in all creation that can ever separate us from the love of God we've found in Jesus Christ, then we realize that we have nothing to be afraid of. We have nothing to fear. If there is nothing we can ever do to lose God's love – if our failure cannot ever change the way God loves us – then what is there in the universe that can ever harm us, ever threaten us, when we know we are loved by Almighty God? John tells us that there is no fear in God's love, because perfect love casts out fear – God's perfect love doesn't make us vulnerable, weak, afraid of what we might lose if we mess up and do or say the wrong thing. God's perfect love gives us boldness, confidence and courage, because we know that as God is, so we are in this world. If Love is deciding to have a piece of your heart go walking around outside your body, well, then that is what God has decided to give to us - we have God's heart in us; through Jesus Christ, the heart of God has been transplanted into every child of God here in this world, so that God abides in us

and we abide in God. We know God's love is in us, and we know God's love is unstoppable, unquenchable, there is nothing we can ever do to lose God's love, so we know that we have nothing to fear.

And once we've set aside our fear – once we know that God abides in us, God's perfect love is living in us, then we can start to look at the world around us in a new way. The same love that we've been given has been given to our brothers and sisters out there in the world – the same heart that God has placed in us is beating out there, in every other child of God, all those who already know what Jesus Christ has done for them, and all those who are just waiting to find out. When we love our neighbours, our brothers and sisters, even our enemies, when we love them, we are loving God, because they are God's beloved children, they are people Jesus Christ died to save. And when we love others, we might still get hurt – the love we give won't always be returned to us, but even when we encounter fear and hostility from those we try to love, it doesn't change God's perfect love for us; there is nothing anyone in the world can do to us that can change the fact that we are loved by God. We can still love the world with boldness and courage, because we know God's love is making us more and more perfect each and every day, and we trust that this same love will keep working in the people we meet, bringing them little by little closer to the kingdom of God.

When we practice love with one another, we know that we will grow closer to being the people who God created us to be, because the love we share is perfect, and nothing can stop that kind of love – not even us.

At some point today, tomorrow, this week, you will run into someone who needs to know that God loves them. All around us, every day, our brothers and sisters are living in a world where love makes you vulnerable, afraid, uncertain, where it is safer to cut yourself off and withdraw into cynicism and fear. And God has given us perfect love, love without fear, love we can share with the world so they know the same love we know, perfect love that casts out all their fear and gives them boldness instead of punishment, life instead of death. Think about how you know that God loves you, how you discovered the love of Jesus Christ in your life, how you have experienced God's love through the love of others, and then through your words and actions, help someone else encounter God's love. We love because God first loved us. God loves you. Go share God's love. In the name of Jesus Christ – Amen.