

**1 John 3:1-2**  
**Becoming**

There is a lot about this text that we do not know. For example, we do not know who wrote it. Some believe it was written by the same John who wrote the Gospel. Some believe it was written by someone known in 2 and 3 John as the elder. Some have other theories. We don't know to whom the letter was written. Was it written to a church in Asia Minor? Was it intended for a new assembly in Africa or Europe? We don't know for sure? We don't even know the particular circumstances that prompted the writer to write it. In Paul's letters like 1 Corinthians or Galatians we have a lot of information about the particular communities and the circumstances under which Paul was writing the letters.

For example, we know that the church at Corinth was grappling with a variety of issues and concerns such as Lawsuits among church members, food sacrificed to idols, the role of women in the church, and how to conduct the Eucharist. In the book of Galatians we know that Paul felt the community in general was foolish because they could not comprehend the concept of grace. They could not understand that simply by believing that Jesus was the Son of God and that God raised Jesus from the dead they were saved and justified. Not by works. They could not earn it. It was a gift from God.

Though we don't know anything about the writer or the circumstances and issues affecting the receivers, we can peep out his agenda if we pay close attention to the text. I liken this text to an onion. We know that an onion is a complex vegetable. One has to peel through many different layers to get to the core. When I was reading this text I found myself being pulled deeper and deeper. I ask you to go with me as we try to get to the core of this thing. Looking at the outside layer of this text, we see over and over again in chapter 3 and throughout 1 John, the writer uses the word agape. In chapter 3 alone agape shows up nine times. Nine times in only twenty three verses - That's a lot of love. But if peel back this outside

overview layer of love and look a little closer we see that the writer not only mentions love many times but highlights the source of the love (being from God) also the intended destination of the love, the recipients of God's love – brothers and sisters should love one another.

Now we are a couple of layers in, but the writer is not done. He is not satisfied to leave the look of love up to his audience. The writer takes us into another layer when he describes what love looks like. He informs the community that love is not some abstract notion to be pondered. Love is not a subject the community banter about in polite conversation. Love is not simply a topic of philosophical debate to be weighed and found wanting. He admonishes his audience that love not simply in word or speech but in truth and action. In other words, as one commentary put it - the writer wanted his audience to do the truth in respect to one another. But the writer is not yet done. Just to make sure that his audience is very clear, he provides a tangible example of how the members of the community to love one another. He provides his example in the form of a question, he is like Alex Trebec in Jeopardy here. He asks "how can the love of God possibly exist in someone who has goods that a brother or sister needs but refuses to share them." For the writer, one way for people in the community to demonstrate their love for one another was to act by sharing what they had.

There was a time in my life when I could not make ends meet. I had left engineering and was trying to figure out what to do with my life. I did sales for a while and that was no easy way to make a living. There were a few months when I could not pay my rent. I was living in California, my parents were in North Carolina. But even over the distance my parents could feel the tension in my voice when we talked on the phone. They did not have a lot. But they shared with me what they had. Several months they helped me pay my rent. They let me know that they knew this was just a temporary setback. That one day soon I would once again be able to take care of myself. Thank God for people like Hazel and Jimmy Mumford, who are willing to share what they have.

When I read this text, I also can't help but think of LPTS. At LPTS throughout the year we have demonstrated our love for one another in truth and action. Two weeks into the semester the wind storm caused a power outage for a week. Love in action compelled many to come together and share their food, drink and time with each in substantive ways. Love in action allowed members of this community to share their gift and talents in chapel by singing, playing the piano or trumpet, preaching, taking photographs, planning worship week after week. The love in action made space in worship for different perspectives, traditions and practices. Love in action made room for the Holy Spirit which we feel when we are in worship. - Love in action navigated us through the QEP process and got us ready for the SACS/ATS visit. Love in action faithfully worked behind the scenes everyday making sure that the campus was cared for, food was available, meetings got scheduled, rooms got reserved, registration was posted, and donors were contacted. Love in action planned and facilitated fascinating lectures and creative classroom experiences. Love in action played intramural basketball, danced at the prom, and created and shared works of art and crafts.

But here at LPTS our love in action is not just a feel good kind of thing. Love in action broached difficult issues such as the forum on racism sponsored by Women at the Well and violence against women in Vagina Monologues sponsored by the Women's Center.

Love in action also compelled us to share our critique of what was happening in our community. Loving a community is like loving individuals. People who really love someone are willing to risk the relationship by telling the truth. In my case, those same parents who were willing to share what they had, were and still are, willing to risk the relationship by telling me when I am wrong, when they did not agree with my actions or something I have said.

At LPTS this year some students have expressed their disappointment and disapproval about feeling marginalized. Some feel their particular cultures and/or worldviews are not only not respected, but are demeaned and belittled. And when the jobs of seven of our community members were eliminated as a result of the

economic crisis, many of us questioned and critiqued the process by which that was done. Every semester students complete evaluations of courses and let us as faculty know what is going well and what is not. Though this type of assessment is needed for accreditation, it is also done out of love for our students. We want your feedback so that we can meet your needs. Every week in the Seminary Times we read that people are having their annual reviews. This is our opportunity to provide honest, critical feedback of their performance. This critique is done in the hope that they will improve their work and thrive among us. Love in the form of critique is alive and well at LPTS.

I am convinced that at the core of all that we have shared this year is love - the love of Christ that seeks to realize that which we cannot yet see. If we did not have the love of Christ within us and among us we would have no expectation that this community could ever be different, better. But this text tells us that we can be more. We can expect more. We can strive for more.

*<sup>2</sup>Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed.*

This text informs us that there is no limit to what we can become. We, like the community in 1 John, are living within the eschatological tension of the already and the not yet. We have each committed ourselves to being followers of Christ while simultaneously expecting that Christ will one day return. We know thanks to the grace of God that we are not what we used to be. But also thanks to the grace of God we are not yet what God is calling us to be. We have each committed to being part of this community, But we have not yet embraced all of our possibilities.

For many in our world today, hope is in short supply. Many people are desperately in need of some good news. There are those who have lost their homes and their jobs. They don't know what tomorrow may bring or even if there will be a tomorrow for them. There are women- and men - in abusive relationships

who need to know God loves them, the people of God love them, and it is possible for them to live better - more stable lives. There are people who are fighting in or victimized by wars they do not understand. There are young people who a year ago thought they would be going to college, but now realize they can't afford it. There are people who have relocated to this country – hoping to find the land of opportunity they seek. Instead they find themselves marginalized, oppressed, and misunderstood. There are those who have been Christians for a long time, who still don't understand or believe in the concept of grace. They live with guilt and shame of the past rather than fully embracing the love and forgiveness of a God of grace and mercy. There are also people who have been Christians who want cheap grace – grace without accountability or consequences.

As ministers of the gospel these are just a few examples of the situations we encounter when we minister to the people of God. Ministry in the twenty first century requires that we think and reach beyond our traditions and denominational boundaries, beyond our narrow worldviews to embrace the endless possibilities of an omnipotent God. As a community that shapes and forms ministers to go into the world and carry the good news, we must continue to love each other. We must love those in our community who look like us and those who don't. We must love who share our values and those who challenge them. We must love even those that we can't understand to save our lives, as well as those who are easy to understand. Only when we are able to love each other unconditionally, in truth and action, you know, the way Christ loves us, can we hope to become – to become the people God is calling us to be.