

There's an old story—it dates back more than a century ago. I've seen updated versions of it, so I suspect it may be an urban legend. But it goes like this.

A young lady was getting married. She was rather nervous and fearful, but decided to take a chance and go ahead with the wedding anyway. Her beloved uncle couldn't make it to the ceremony. So he decided to send a telegram with words of encouragement to his niece on her wedding day.

He wanted to end that telegram with a bible verse about love. He chose this one: "There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear."

But since Western Union charged by the word, he sent only the verse reference: 1John 4:18.

But somewhere in transmission the 1 in front of 1John was omitted. So when the bride opened her bible to John 4:18, she was shocked to read, "You have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband."

Apparently it's important to know the difference between John and 1John.

Actually, John and 1John have much in common. The First Epistle of John probably comes from the same church and same school of thought as the Gospel of John. And they share similar vocabulary and the same theological worldview. They may even have been written by the same person, who for convenience's sake we'll call "John."

But the First Epistle of John focuses in on one main attribute of God and of Jesus Christ. This attribute is also found in the Gospel of John. But the First Epistle of John really emphasizes it, and marimates in it, and meditates on it, and comes back to it over and over again.

The core of the First Epistle of John is a reflection on love. And that particular word, "love" is used over and over again.

The word "love" appears 57 times in the Gospel of John, 57 times in 878 verses, basically once for every 15 verses on average.

But love appears 46 times in the short 105 verses of the First Epistle of John, once every 2 verses on average.

And 28 of those references to love are crammed into the brief 15 verses of today's Epistle lesson.

I'm actually going to return to the first part of our Epistle lesson next week, because it lines up with next weeks' Gospel lesson.

But today I want to focus on that idea from the end of our lesson, the verse that the uncle in the story was trying to send to his niece:

"There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear."¹

In a little broader context, the quote is this:

"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. 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. We love because he first loved us."²

When John is talking about "perfect love" he's talking about God's love for us, and how God's love for us is made know in Jesus Christ.

So when he says, "Perfect love casts out fear," he's telling us that in the love of God, the love made known in Jesus Christ, means we don't have to be fearful ever again.

And we especially don't need to be afraid of punishment. Again, in the fuller context, "There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment."

There are a lot of people who are worried about God punishing them. I've shared before about an encounter I had with a dear older lady when I was first ordained.

She had just been diagnosed with cancer. And she wanted to know if I thought that God sent that cancer to punish her. Specifically she wanted to know if that cancer was God's punishment for an affair she had had 40 years earlier.

I've talked with many other folks, who were approaching the ends of their lives and were fearful. They were worried they hadn't done enough good things in their lives to please God, to make God love them.

This is a common picture of God. God is somehow the policemen or judge, just waiting to punish even the slightest infractions. Life becomes like some divine speed-trap. If God catches you, you're in trouble. Like the horrible words to the old country song,

*God's gonna get 'cha for that
 God's gonna get 'cha for that
 There's no place to run and hide
 For He knows where you're at
 God's gonna get 'cha for that
 God's gonna get 'cha for that
 Every wrong thing that you do
 God's gonna get 'cha for that³*

That's classic fear of punishment. But as 1John tells us, "Fear has to do with punishment."

¹ 1Jn 4:18

² 1Jn 4:17-19

³ I usually love George Jones & Tammy Wynette, but this is an awful lyric...

But that's not what God is about. That's not God's goal. "There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear."

And in the First Epistle of John, and in the Gospel of John there is one supreme example of God's perfect love, and that is Jesus lifted on the cross.

There are many meanings to the cross. But one of them is God in Jesus Christ showing us that we don't have to be afraid. On the cross, Jesus takes the very worst that this world can dish out.

You may remember the movie *Rocky III*, where Rocky has to make a comeback against Clubber Lang, played by Mr. T.

Part of Rocky's strategy is to try to take everything Clubber Lang can throw at him. Rocky stands there [with his arms up protecting his head] taking punch after punch.

And then Rocky starts to taunt Clubber Lang: "You ain't so bad. You ain't so bad. You ain't nothin'."

Clubber responds, "You must be crazy or somethin'... You're just a stupid fool."

But then in the next round, Rocky goes from defense to offense, and he wins the fight.

But there's one huge difference between the finale of Rocky III and Jesus.

On the cross, Jesus doesn't cover up. He's not trying to protect himself. On the cross, God takes everything we can dish out, and God doesn't hit back.

We hit God with everything we can. Things that frighten us deeply: suffering, pain, abandonment, and finally death itself.

And Jesus takes everything we can dish out. With arms wide open he takes everything that frightens us. And he basically says, 'That ain't so bad. That ain't so bad. That ain't nothin'.'

We put him on the cross, and the first thing he says is "Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they're doing."⁴

And the last thing he says is, "It is finished."⁵ This is not throwing in the towel. This is saying, 'It is accomplished. Mission accomplished. I've won.'

⁴ Lk 23:34

⁵ Jn 19:30

Jesus takes everything we can dish out, even death itself. And then he rises from the grave on Easter morning.

That's God's way of saying,
'See? You don't have to be fearful. You don't have to be afraid. Perfect love casts out fear. Even death is nothing to be afraid of. Death is just a phase. But on the other side of death is new and eternal life.'

So don't be afraid, God is telling us.

I love you. I love you this much [arms outstretched on the cross].

I love so much that I was willing to die for you.

I love you so much that I want to spend eternity with you.

And I love you so much that I want you to live, and to love, to love others as I love you.

So don't be afraid.

Don't be afraid.