

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
305 EAST MAIN STREET
DURHAM, NC 27701
PHONE: (919) 682-5511



“The Red Scarf: Wrapped in God’s Love”

A sermon by Marilyn T. Hedgpeth

Fifth Sunday of Easter / Confirmation Sunday (Year B)

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Acts 8:26–40; John 15:1–8; Ps. 139:1–4, 13–18; 1 John 4:7–23

If you grew up in the church, do you remember the first songs
you learned there as a child?

Some of the earliest songs, which I was taught in Sunday School
or at Vacation Bible School or at home come from this passage in 1 John 4.

Praise him, Praise him, all ye little children: God is love, God is love,

(Love him, Love him. Serve him. Serve him...) comes from verse 8:

“Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love.”

We love, because God first loved us. We love because God first loved us.

We love, we love, we love, because God first loved us, comes from
verse 10 and verse 19:

“In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us...

We love, because he first loved us.”

Even *Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so*
could derive from v. 10 also.

“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.

In this is love...”

We are touching a primal chord here, teaching babies about God’s love
in some of the very first songs we learn to sing

and in some of the very first words we learn to speak.
The word of God becomes in-fleshed and dwells within us, abides with us,
all of our lives, and if we are lucky, even into our days of aging and forgetting
as we recall these primal songs of God's love for us.
Or in the language of 1 John, we re-member because God membered us first!
I started writing this sermon at Ed Kwon's home last week
as I was sitting in his den early in the morning hours after Delia and
Talitha had left for work and school, and as Ed was sleeping upstairs,
regaining strength for the day ahead, recharging his spirit for
another day of being re-membered by God in the face of cancer.

Our Confirmation Class of eighth and ninth graders,
which we are honoring this morning,
received red hand-knitted scarves from Barbara Fish and her Prayer Shawl Group
back in January, on Baptism of the Lord Sunday,
when this congregation re-affirmed our baptismal vows to these youth
and wrapped them in these red scarves as a sign of God's ongoing
love for them, whether they decide to be confirmed or not.
Anne Leathers, a saint of this church who died last week at the age of 95,
is one of the people who always knitted scarves for our confirmands.
And I think these red scarves are significant reminders of the primacy of God's love
in our lives, and of the prevenient grace which they declare,
wrapping our youth in love first before they even have a chance
to say yea or nay to confirmation.

In light of this ancient epistle from 1 John to the early church,
I want to make three observations about your red scarves this morning.
*First, that they are a knitted reminder, that it is God who knits us together
in our mother's womb, initially.*

I included Psalm 139 in today's liturgy because it reminds us so eloquently

that God knew us first before we ever knew anything about God.
God knew our thoughts, our ways, and our words before we ever thought them,
walked them, or spoke them.

When Jesus first called the first twelve disciples and instructed them before
granting them authority to drive out evil spirits and to heal diseases
and sicknesses, he encouraged them NOT to be afraid
because "even the hairs of your head are all numbered," he said. (Matt. 10:1, 30)

In other words, God knows us in that detail: our gray hairs,
the fillings in our teeth, our acne scars, our old sports injuries,
our food allergies, our phobias, our failed relationships, our selfies,
our physical and emotional asymmetries, and yet, God loves us still.

I love the knitting imagery that the Psalmist uses here:

"You created my inmost being;
you knit me together in my mother's womb...
I was woven together in the depths of the earth...
all the days ordained for me were written in your book
before one of them came to be." (Psalm 139:13, 15, 16)

In Reformed Theology, you might think this is a statement about predestination,
as if God has pre-ordained every step of our lives.

But I like to think of it more in terms of the prevenient grace I mentioned before,
as if God's grace shapes us before we ever have a chance
to self-determine and tinker with our own shape and plan.

One theologian notes, "Contrary to our inclination toward the quid pro quo,
God has decided in our favor apart from our ability to reciprocate,
gracing us with love prior to and independent of any response
we might offer, for no reason other than that

love is the very nature of God that is knowable by human beings."

(C. Clifton Black, *New Interpreter's Bible*. Nashville. Abingdon Press, 1998,
12:433)

As I write this, I hear Ed's alarm go off upstairs; it goes off for about 15 minutes before I hear his feet contact the floor and quietly begin to shuffle around. He's a lightweight these days, so his coming and going is harder to detect.

Ed and I have talked about how much he loves question #1

of the Heidelberg Catechism, "What is your only comfort in life and in death? That I belong—body and soul, in life and in death—not to myself

but to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ... (and) that he protects me so well that without the will of my Father in heaven, not a hair can fall from my head..."

God has knit us together like a scarf; God knows us in great detail,

God knows the pattern of our lives, the wharf and the woof,
and God loves every thread and knot of us.

Secondly, we are wrapped in God's love like a red scarf that

has been fashioned, stitch by stitch, by a community of faith.

There are two words that resonate throughout this passage in 1 John:

Agape—Beloved—the first word of the passage meaning love that gives,

"just because," without expectation of reciprocation or return;

and *meno*—to remain or abide—meaning that God's love nests in us as we nest in God.

I would like to tell you that God's love for you is like your red scarf,

and that anytime you wear that red scarf, any time that you are cold or lonely or fearful or sick or even dying,

that God's love, embodied by this church, is wrapped around you like a hug.

But it's even better than that: God's love remains or abides in you,

even when you take the scarf off, even when it's no longer winter,

even when you forget it, or when your sister borrows it, or when you lose it, or when you catch it on a fence and it tears.

God's love, embodied by the church, the community of faith,
is wrapped around you still like a hug.

I went on-line and looked up "red scarf" to see if there were any wider significance attached to red scarves, and I discovered something in our country called *The Red Scarf Project*.

The Red Scarf Project is part of a support program for children who grow up in foster care, providing a red scarf to each foster child upon entering college as a tangible sign of a caring community behind that young person.

Beyond the scarves, *The Red Scarf Project* also provides relief aid to foster students for medical expenses, transportation costs, rent, groceries and clothing.

For students without biological families on which to rely, *The Red Scarf* is a symbol of God's agape love, "just because," that will undergird and support them throughout their college years until they can be self-supporting.

And so it is with your red scarves this morning.

They are a sign of a community that is knit together by God's agape love and that expresses that love in caring about you: First Presbyterian Church!

Frederick Buechner once said that "to say that God is love is either the last straw or the ultimate truth." (Frederick Buechner. *Beyond Words*. "Love", p. 231)

We are baptized and confirmed as adopted members of a God-family, which is not biological in origin.

And it is this wider God-family that will provide your support as you continue your journeys of faith.

Ed told me one time that he decided early on in his battle with pancreatic cancer to allow this church, FPC, to be his God-family.

He said that since most of his biological family is on the west coast, he was going to have to open his life to the church family that he, Delia and Talitha are part of here.

And that act of opening your life to others outside of your biological circle takes great courage.

To this day, this God-family has sent more than 36 different individuals to take turns staying with Ed, mornings or afternoons,

so the Hospice team can come and go while Delia and Talitha are away.

In a way, I could say that the Kwons are knitting us together as a tighter community of faith.

Stitch by stitch, this God-family has wrapped its arms around them in agape love.

And that love is a sign of the greater love God has for you.

And lastly, red is the color of your scarves.

Red is the color of sacrifice. I won't soft-pedal it—red is the color of blood.

Red is the color of the blood of conception, birth, suffering and death.

Red is the color of being fully human, fully vulnerable, fully mortal.

Red rhymes with Ed, I tell myself, as Ed puts on his hat, turns the key in the lock,

shows me the remains of his beautiful tulips beaten down by the rain,

but not destroyed, as we slowly make our way out to the car.

Red is the color of courage, even when life beats you down.

Red is the color of God's love revealed to us in this way:

that God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him,

so that we might love like him, first our own siblings,

brothers and sisters whom we have seen,

and then reaching out to those like little Seth Greyson Brown,

or Michael Brown, or Eric Garner, or Freddie Gray, whom we have never seen.

Red, this week, is the color of the bricks and blood of Baltimore.

Red is the color of the One God sent, who at the cost of his own blood,

fully paid for all our sins, of omission and commission.

Red is the color of the flag of fear or anger that is cast out by perfect love.

Red is the color of the Holy Spirit that God gives us as confidence to

trust in God's abiding presence and to witness to the love of Jesus Christ.

Red also is the color of romantic love: go Valentine shopping and you will see.

Red is the color of love received and love given.

Red is the color of love that is strong as death and passion that is fierce as the grave.

Red is the color of the saints, the witnesses, the martyrs, the faithful,

who have shed their blood for the sake of the Gospel.

Red is the color of love that will cost you dearly if you wade in its waters.
Red is the color of the scarves that you will one day wrap around others—
girlfriends, husbands, babies, children, friends, strangers, students, mentees,
grandchildren, neighbors... even enemies—
as you love them, as God has loved you, and abide in that love. Amen.