

LOVE

WEEK FOUR

A Reading from Biblical Wisdom: 1 John 4:7-12

Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. 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, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.

Context for the Contemporary Wisdom

In the fourth week of Advent, we celebrate the unearned and unconditional love of God that will come among us in the birth of a baby in Bethlehem. We ponder the conditions that we place upon our love and our loyalty, as well as our sin of declaring some people outside the reach of God's love.

Toni Morrison's 1998 novel, *Paradise*, is about a paradise lost because of fear and suspicion. It describes events that cause nine men from an exclusively African-American town in Oklahoma to kill a group of women, black and white, who have taken refuge from abuse and violence in an old mansion just south of town; the men are convinced that the presence of these women has caused the deterioration of their community. Halfway through the novel, at the long-awaited wedding of two townspeople, an elderly preacher offers words that please some people and offend others.

A Reading from Contemporary Wisdom

Excerpt from Toni Morrison's novel *Paradise*

- <https://youtu.be/DJl3vjs-KI> (A video from the New York Times, honoring Nobel and Pulitzer Prize winning author Toni Morrison)

"Let me tell you about love, that silly word you believe is about whether you like somebody or whether somebody likes you or whether you can put up with somebody

in order to get something or someplace you want or you believe it has to do with how your body responds to another body like robins or bison or maybe you believe love is how forces or nature or luck is benign to you in particular not maiming or killing you but if so doing it for your own good.

“Love is none of that. There is nothing in nature like it. Not in robins or bison or in the banging tails of your hunting dogs and not in blossoms or suckling foal. Love is divine only and difficult always. If you think it is easy you are a fool. If you think it is natural you are blind. It is a learned application without reason or motive except that it is God.

“You do not deserve love regardless of the suffering you have endured. You do not deserve love because somebody did you wrong. You do not deserve love just because you want it. You can only earn - by practice and careful contemplations - the right to express it and you have to learn how to accept it. Which is to say you have to earn God. You have to practice God. You have to think God-carefully. And if you are a good and diligent student you may secure the right to show love.

“Love is not a gift. It is a diploma. A diploma conferring certain privileges: the privilege of expressing love and the privilege of receiving it. How do you know you have graduated? You don't. What you do know is that you are human and therefore educable, and therefore capable of learning how to learn, and therefore interesting to God, who is interested only in Himself which is to say He is interested only in love.

“Do you understand me? God is not interested in you. He is interested in love and the bliss it brings to those who understand and share the interest. Couples that enter the sacrament of marriage and are not prepared to go the distance or are not willing to get right with the real love of God cannot thrive. They may cleave together like robins or gulls or anything else that mates for life. But if they eschew this mighty course, at the moment when all are judged for the disposition of their eternal lives, their cleaving won't mean a thing. God bless the pure and holy. Amen.”

Questions for Reflection

According to one reviewer, the novel "Paradise" explores "the dangers of excessive love--for children, mates, or God. It also addresses a question that has always intrigued Morrison: 'Why paradise necessitates exclusion.'"

1. Does love come naturally to us, or is it a skill that we must learn?
2. The men of the town blame a group of women for the loss of their "paradise." How do we blame others for our misfortune?
3. The love of their community causes the men of the town to commit a horrible crime. Are there other examples of loving "excessively" or in a way that is harmful?
4. Morrison's preacher says that, while we cannot earn love, we must earn the right to express our love and learn how to accept love from others. Do you agree with him?
5. How can we offer the same kind of love that God offers to us?

Closing Prayer

God of justice and love, we thank you that your Word took flesh and dwelled among us, showing us the humble and self-sacrificing love that is your very nature. Help us to be ambassadors of that love and tireless workers for your justice, that all may know the peace, the joy, and the hope you desire for them. Amen.