

SUMMER OF LOVE

Sermon-Based Study Guide
Good Shepherd Presbyterian Church

1st John 1.1-4
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I. Connecting With One Another

Think of an event that drastically changed the course of your life. What was it? Did it change your life for better or worse? Why? Were you responsible for what happened?

II. Introduction to this Series and Study

This weekend we begin a series on the Letter of First John, which we're calling "Summer of Love." That title may bring to mind the summer of 1967, when somewhere around 100,000 young people gathered in San Francisco in what became known as the "Hippie Revolution." Suffice it to say we're thinking of a different summer of love! We're thinking about the summer of 2013, where we – those the Spirit of God has gathered to connect with God, grow in faith, and serve in love – commit ourselves to learning how to love God and our neighbor, upon which, Jesus declared, all the Law and Prophets hang. (see Matthew 22.34-40)

This study guide engages 1st John 1.1-4, often referred to as the prologue to John's letter. As we'll see, however, this prologue no throw away introduction – it is quite necessary for the letter that follows. And what's more, it's one of, if not the, most profound openings to any letter, ever! Within four short verses, John sets out the good news of the incarnation, that the God became human – *really human!* – in the person of Jesus, that through Him we can share life with God and with one another, and that we get to take part in proclaiming that good news to the world! "In only four short verses?" you ask. "Yes! In only four short verses!"

III. Study the Text

- a. Read 1st John 1.1-4. How do you understand these verses? Try to summarize it in a sentence here:

What reasons does John give in these verses for writing this letter?

What questions do these verses bring up for you? Take some time to share your questions (if you're discussing this with a group).

- b. While we'll study these verses later this summer, flip ahead to 1st John 4.1-3. We don't know exactly what's going on in the church to which John is writing (since we don't have any correspondence from them), though it appears that some were questioning whether Jesus was fully human. Notice, specifically, verses 2-3.

Apparently, John is engaging one of the earliest heresies of Christian faith known as "Docetism," which holds that Jesus *seemed* or *appeared* to be human, but was actually only a divine being (the Greek word *dokein*, from which we get the term Docetism, means "to seem"). Have you ever heard someone questioning whether Jesus was actually human? Or have you heard the opposite – someone questioning whether Jesus was divine?

Read Philippians 2.5-11. How do these verses from Paul's letter to the church in Philippi help you understand that Jesus is both human and divine?

- c. As we will discuss throughout this series, many commentators believe that 1st John has a special dependence upon the Gospel of John. Perhaps the same author wrote both, or someone else wrote 1st John as a kind of commentary on the gospel account. Either way, there are a number of connections between the two that we'll explore throughout our Summer of Love!

Read John 1.1-18. What similarities do you see in 1st John? Any differences? How do you see 1st John building upon the gospel of John?

If you'd like to dig even deeper, read Colossians 1.15-23. This letter, written by Paul, engages some similar theological territory. What similarities do you see? Differences?

- d. Notice, at the outset of 1st John, the author doesn't even take time to greet his audience, but instead launches right into what he wants to say. Scholars point out that in the Greek the first three verses are actually one sentence, with the object awkwardly coming first, and the subject and verb are not included until verse 3!

Why do you think John is so excited to jump right in to what he wants to say? What have we discussed above that could help us understand why he is so focused?

- e. The word for "fellowship" in verse 3 is the Greek word *koinonia*, which means "joint ownership," "partnership," or "mutual sharing." Elsewhere this term refers to sharing material goods (see Romans 15.26) or spiritual benefits (see 1st Corinthians 9.23). One commentator explains it this way:

Christian fellowship is not the sentimental and superficial attachment of a random collection of individuals, but the profoundly mutual relationship of those who remain 'in Christ,' and therefore belong to each other.

How does this biblical definition of fellowship challenge our sometimes shallow understanding of community?

- f. Verse 4 states, "We write this to make our joy complete." What do you think the author means by that? Is it the act of writing, or that the church will receive this letter, that brings joy?

IV. Reflect and Respond

- a. In your own spiritual journey and thinking, have you tended to view Jesus more as human or more as divine? How do these verses correct an overemphasis in one direction or another?
- b. How does the good news of God's incarnation in Jesus encourage you to live in relationship with others?
- c. Have you ever launched right into a conversation like John does here? What do you get that excited to talk about?

Jesus said that our mouths speak out of the overflow of our hearts. How could your discussions with others include an opportunity to "make (y)our joy complete"?

- d. In what ways are you connected to others in mutual sharing? How could you be even more of a blessing to others in our church family? In your neighborhood? In your family? In your workplace? How could your partnership "make your joy complete"?

V. Spend some time in prayer:

- a. Pray for Good Shepherd's continued work of discernment, especially lifting up our Discernment Working Party, the pastors, elders and leaders of our church to be led by God,
- b. Ask God's Holy Spirit to guide the children and families of our community into the realization of who Jesus is: fully God and fully man!
- c. Lift up this study of 1st John, that through it God would make Himself known as we connect with Him, grow in Him, and serve Him and the people He loves.