

**“Rethinking Life: The Church as a Force for Life”**

1 John 4:16-21

If the church is truly a force for life, how do we navigate the complex moral issues of our day, especially those concerning life and death? This challenge is amplified in our current political and social climate, where information and personal stories are often manipulated. Think about the many years the abortion debate dominated public discourse, centered around Roe v. Wade. I recently read "The Family Roe" by Joshua Prager and was struck by how Norma McCorvey, "Jane Roe" herself, was used by both sides to justify their views. She was a complex, flawed human being, yet in their zeal to win the abortion battle, both the left and the right selectively highlighted aspects of her life and beliefs that served their political objectives, often at the expense of her true, complicated humanity.

Prager's work reveals how easily individuals, particularly those at the heart of high-stakes social issues, can become symbols—molded and deployed, their personal complexities subsumed by ideological narratives. McCorvey's story, as told by Prager, is a tragic testament to the human cost of these "abortion wars," where a person's life becomes a battleground for competing ideologies.

The Family Roe book: <https://youtu.be/BiMlc3KIFtY>

Consider another example: capital punishment, and the ongoing debate about its morality. We can identify many such issues, finding ourselves conflicted on multiple levels. Life is inherently complex. Issues often seem clear only when we aren't personally grappling with them. Political debates are frequently reduced to buzzwords and slogans, infused with fear designed to cloud our judgment. It's far more challenging to engage with these issues when we are in relationship with those directly impacted. And we must remember, throughout history, Christians driven by fear instead of love have made grave mistakes on issues like slavery, war, colonialism, and antisemitism. We can't pretend we're immune to such errors.

So, how do we navigate our way through life with the guidance of God's Spirit? The invitation is to **honor the image of God in every person** and let that be our compass. Truth is relational! If we are to uphold a consistent ethic of life, we must remain focused on the truth that emerges from genuine, caring, and loving relationships. This is precisely what the author of 1 John wanted the early Christian community to remember. They seemed to have forgotten that **unconditional love** was the core of Christian life.

Written around or after 100 CE, as the Christian movement entered its second century, the letter addresses a community already marked by major divisions. Having separated from Judaism and grappling with diverse teachings about Jesus and various competing philosophies, the author of 1 John proposes something radically different from all the theological and philosophical debates of his time. This letter, more like a sermon for a general audience, calls Christ's followers to **focus on the centrality of love** in their faith. Love in human relationships was the answer he offered.

This wasn't an easy answer. It wasn't just a call to "get along." He challenged his audience to step down from their high moral and theological horses and truly follow Jesus through **sacrificial acts of love**. They needed to shift their focus from conflict to practicing love, trusting that honest and authentic sharing within their community would keep them centered on love.

Let's listen to 1 John 4:16-21:

God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. 17 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. 18 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. 19 We love because he first loved us. 20 Those who say, "I love God," and hate a brother or sister are liars, for those who do not love a brother or sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen. 21 The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.

The wisdom offered here is challenging because it's always easier to *talk* about faith than to *practice* it. It's far simpler to "defend" the boundaries of "true" faith than to live out Christ's high calling of unconditional love in our daily lives, both for ourselves and for our neighbors. It's tempting to remain in a "fear of God" mindset, where we label people based on our likes and dislikes. It's hard to keep our focus on love, especially when love demands letting go of judgment and truly being present to one another, even amidst prejudice, fear, and the new challenges of our world.

The true measure of our faith isn't theological or doctrinal correctness, but genuine love for Christ and for the world God loved and redeemed. The author gives us three indicators to measure our faith:

1. **Being awakened to God's love in all creation.**
2. **Being committed to loving others**, both believers and nonbelievers—meaning those we agree with and those we don't.
3. **Sharing our resources with the poor.**

Only love is strong enough to transform us into Christ's likeness and to help us live into the truth of God's love in the world!

So, how do we apply this in our daily lives? The invitation is to **grow in our relationships with others and let love be our guide**. We may know many facts about someone or some topic, but truly *knowing* the person or the topic requires relationships, because God designed life to be relational. We are called to relationships that foster care, love, and an openness to discovering the path forward together.

The next time you feel strongly about an issue, take the time to nurture relationships with people directly impacted by it. This isn't about a one-off connection, but deeply getting to know the people involved and their stories of struggle. For example, if you have strong feelings about the conflict in Israel and Palestine, be intentional about knowing some people who are directly impacted. Let your passion for life be profoundly connected to people and their stories.

I invite you today to leave this place with a renewed commitment to the relational truth of God's love. Let us be a church that is a **force for life, not just in word, but in concrete, loving action**. May we be known by our love—a love that casts out fear, embraces complexity, and seeks to understand the stories of all those around us. May our relationships be the fertile ground from which justice and compassion grow, truly reflecting the very heart of God. Amen.