

Message and Scripture
28 April 2024

Scripture Reading 1 John 3:16-24

¹⁶ We know love by this, that [Jesus] laid down his life for us--and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. ¹⁷ How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a [sibling] in need and yet refuses help? ¹⁸ Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.

¹⁹ And by this we will know that we are from the truth and will reassure our hearts before [God] ²⁰ whenever our hearts condemn us; for God is greater than our hearts, and [God] knows everything.

²¹ Beloved, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have boldness before God; ²² and we receive from [God] whatever we ask, because we obey [God's] commandments and do what pleases [the Creator]. ²³ And this is [the Creator's] commandment, that we should believe in the name of [the beloved Child] Jesus Christ and love one another, just as [Jesus] has commanded us. ²⁴ All who obey [Jesus's] commandments abide in [Jesus], and [Jesus] abides in them. And by this we know that [Jesus] abides in us, by the Spirit that [God] has given us.

Hear what the Spirit is saying to the church.

Thanks be to God.

Message: We Abide in Christ

Once again John, in the persona of a wise old writer and veteran Christian leader, challenges the young believers, the 'new' Christians in their struggling churches to deal with the challenges of faith. Walk in the light or walk in love. Make those choices that add to your joy and keep on keeping on. Continue on the journey of discipleship. Continue on to perfection. Now John challenges us again. This morning John challenges us to love sacrificially.

What does it mean to love sacrificially? One example you all showed me is in the way you are willing to love members of our community who have many needs – continual needs. And I don't just mean your pastor – though you have shown my family a level of love and care that warms the soul and reignites my love for the church.

No, I am talking about the stories of how you loved Katherine – whom I never met. Remember, she passed the week I started as your pastor. She had no family here and we and MBK took on providing a memorial service for the community. She was remembered again at the MBK luncheon on Friday. I heard how you became her network to get groceries and get to appointments. I heard how you took her into your hearts even though her life experience was horrific, and her exuberance was uncomfortable. I heard how Katherine said you all made the last 5 years of her life the best in her life.

Love in action. Maybe it seems like a small thing. We – you – didn't change the circumstances that led to Katherine having such a difficult life – generational poverty and abuse are still very much issues in our community, our country, and the world, but we – you – did change one person's life – and showed her the unconditional love God has for each one of us.

This reminds me of the story of the starfish. An adult was walking along the beach one day and saw in the distance a child picking up something and flinging it out into the ocean. The child repeated this motion again and again and as the adult drew nearer, they say that the child was picking up the starfish left behind by the tide and throwing them back into the ocean before they died.

The adult asked the child what they thought they were accomplishing. This was an endless and thankless task. Not only would the next tide leave more starfish back dying on the beach, but this was only one beach in all the world. How was this one morning's walk along this one beach going to change anything?

The child responded by picking up a star fish and as they threw it into the ocean they said, “I changed it for that one.”

Are we eager to show Christ’s love for one another in truth and action? Are we ready to study the example of Jesus, who laid down his life for us? How do we absorb God’s lesson for us? How do we express our love in more than words? What actions do we take?

What sacrifices of comfort, finances, time, and energy have we – have you, have I - sacrificed recently – been willing to sacrifice recently?

Young activists like Greta Thunberg have been boycotting school on Fridays to protest global political leaders’ lack of action on climate change. The intense fear, grief, and anxiety brought on by learning about climate change has moved many young people to join these actions since 2018. Often, these young folks take action on social media to raise awareness and invite more young people to participate.

In 2016, Indigenous activists at Standing Rock, North Dakota, physically put themselves in danger to protect the sacred sites and natural resources threatened by the Dakota Access Pipeline. Thousands gathered to physically protect that piece of God’s Creation that was under attack, many motivated by faith.

Christian civil rights leaders like John Lewis and Martin Luther King Jr. put their lives on the line to challenge deeply entrenched racism and win justice and civil liberties for themselves and their people—even if they weren’t able to see this come to fruition.

Is there any. **one.** – **any. one. life.** – we have worked to change? Recently? I feel conflicted and indicted by these questions.

On the one hand, We do a lot. MBK; community dinners; during care month last year we went and filled bags of meals for those without (a sacrifice of time and energy). We have been helping over at the Second Wind house. We hand out food cards and gas cards. We do a lot.

But on the other hand, who have we really touched? What life have we changed. Where have we given so sacrificially that God’s unconditional love has been made known? Have we become like the parable of the two brothers?

The parable of the two brothers is found in Matt21:28-32 – The Father asked his two sons to go and work in the fields, the elder said yes but didn’t do it; but the younger said no but did do it. Who did the will of the Father?

What can we do to really show God’s love for our neighbors? I come back to our dinners, I come back to our gift cards.

Handing out a gift card is easy. And it is transactional – in a way. We give a ‘gift’ to someone who expresses need and they thank us. But do we really help? Are we really showing love? Or are we extending the problem? I only ask because there is one family in town that has made our ‘gifts’ a regular stop in their lifestyle. We get the call every month asking for a food card or a gas card or both. The month is longer than the money. The kids need milk. They are hungry now – today – can’t wait for the food pantry – don’t want the food pantry – if we don’t have a food card, then how about the gas card...as they drive up in a nice late model vehicle...I’ve seen the behavior of the adults, I recognize the symptoms of addiction and generational poverty. Poverty that is a cycle – poverty where reliance on handouts has become the job – no longer a hand-up and out of poverty, but instead a way of keeping people impoverished by teaching that there is no way – no reason to get out. And in giving out the cards am I just keeping the cycle functioning? And here is where I indict myself, where is the relationship? And what kind of ‘rules’ are appropriate? And can I/ should I even offer / ask “what can we” do to help – on top of the gift cards.

Knowing, feeling, that any other help would be turned down – and has been in a sense turned down, because there is no impetus to change. Many people who have seen – known – have family members who are in the throes of addiction can attest to that. So do we continue to support this family – in our own small way – or do we try something different – whatever that difference may be.

One part of the community dinners that stands out as exceptional to me is the expectation of relationship. When we are serving the dinners, we are expected to sit and talk with the people who came and eat. We get to know them a little. Ask how their day was. We've gotten to know the names of so many of the groups – many who come for the socializing and not just the hot meal. And since we know they are there for the company, have any of us done more – built a relationship outside of the dinners? Invited a lonely person to sit and visit at another time or place?

And for those who come because they truly need the hot meal, have we asked or bothered to find out if we can help in other ways? And yes, some of it is on them. They haven't asked, haven't taken advantage of getting to know us. Haven't come to church...like Katherine.

Do we wait for the hurting children of God to come to us? Do we wait for them to tell us what they think they need – like a gas card? Or do we go out to them? Offer them God's love in action in some new way – or even old way – in the larger community? I don't know the answer.

But I am reassured by John. He writes, "And by this we will know that we are from the truth and will reassure our hearts before [God] whenever our hearts condemn us; for God is greater than our hearts, and [God] knows everything." (v. 19-20).

God knows our hearts, and our hearts for ministry and love for the community even when we don't know what the next step is – even when all we know how to do is to open our doors for a meal each week or to hand out a gift card. God knows our hearts and loves us. Amen.