



# “Living in Love”

a sermon by

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Our text this morning comes from 1 John 3:16-24. “We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us- and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. How does God’s love abide in anyone who has the world’s goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses to help? Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action. And by this we will know that we are from the truth and will reassure our hearts before him whenever our hearts condemn us; for God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything. Beloved, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have boldness before God; and we receive from him whatever we ask, because we obey his commandments and do what pleases him. And this is his commandment, that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us. All who obey his commandments abide in him, and he abides in them. And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit that he has given us.”

About a hundred years after Christ’s resurrection the book of 1 John was written. It is speculated that it was authored in Ephesus in response to a group called Docetics that rejected the teachings of the church. These folks, later deemed heretics, embraced the spiritual reality of Jesus but not his physical reality. They believed that Jesus was, in effect, only divine, only spirit, and that while God had revealed himself to the world through Jesus’ divinity, God did not fully enter into the human situation through his humanity. Humanity was just too corrupt in their minds, so how could almighty God possibly enter into it? So, Jesus to them became a pleasant if significant abstraction of God’s love, but one whose literal feet never really touched the ground. God’s love lighted upon the earth, but never really rolled up it’s sleeves to get its hands dirty in it.

When we talk about love ourselves this can be the case for us too. We have over spiritualized, over sensationalized, over sensualized abstractions about love in our popular culture, but we can sometimes struggle to put love’s feet on the ground.

Think of the messages we receive about love on a daily basis. Decades of musicians have told us that all we need is love. That love lifts us up where we belong. Every February 14, love is manifested in chocolate, plush red hearts with lace trim, and sparkly things. Apparently there are different love languages- ways people experience and express love like through gifts or verbal affirmation or touch. You can’t buy love but every message we receive tells us it’s for sale. You can’t make love happen though there are entire industries devoted to helping us better market ourselves to attract love. When you are in love things are supposed to be easier and so when times get tough you wonder if you are out of love, surely love is supposed to lift us above such trivialities as arguing over how to load the dishwasher.

There are volumes of abstract notions about love floating around, but what in the world do any of them mean? You have to wonder, can we not speak about love in anything other than amorphous, voluminous terms that don’t really tell us anything about how we are actually supposed to be in relationship with other people? “Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action,” John says to those who would try to over-spiritualize Jesus and, correspondingly, God’s love. Because amorphous, voluminous statements about the divinity of Christ are great, but when you are talking about forming a church and being in community with one another, let alone being a community that is somehow supposed to look different than the rest of the world because of him, than what we know about Jesus has got to teach us something about the way we are supposed to be in relationship with other people. The love of God that we learn from him has got to have its feet on the ground.

The apostle John is fiercely committed to telling us something very real about love, based on the very real example of a Christ who lived, walked, breathed, touched the leper, went to the cross and died for our sins. And what we learn from this walk of his, the embodiment of the love that God has given us and the love that we are called to, is that love “is not a spiritual high that lifts us above the problems of everyday life or takes us out of the world. On the contrary, God’s love sends us into the very world for which Christ lived and died.” Love brings all of life into the gospel by taking the gospel into all of life. Christ moved through the world and touched everyone- sinner, righteous, clean, unclean, rich, poor- to prove that no one is outside the bounds of God’s saving love. Which is why, when we look at the world through the lens of the gospel, we cannot help but see that things are not as they should be.

This is one of the things we learn from the cross. That quite apart from sparing our sensibilities from the sight of suffering, God’s love actually uncovers it. Rather than our faith giving us rose colored glasses through which to view the world we are given x-ray vision that enables us to see into the painful heart of the matters before us if we are willing to open our eyes. This is what happens when the good news of the immensity of God’s love that we know and that has been revealed in Christ collides before our very eyes with the effects of our inability to love one another that are strewn about everywhere around us. Homelessness, racism, violence in our streets, greed strong enough to topple economies, malnutrition, inequity in our schools, diseases like AIDS and TB that thrive on poverty as their host- I imagine that, were we not people of faith, these things would be probably be equally offensive to us, but perhaps we would feel a little less implicated. Because when we encounter or read about these realities, when we see them plastered across the evening news or hunkered down for the night in a filthy corner of our streets, don’t we feel, somewhere deep inside, that there is a finger pointing at us?

At our collective failure, somehow, to live into God’s command- at our failure to really love? So what then, does it mean to love? “We know love by this (John says), that he laid down his life for us- and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. How does God’s love abide in anyone who has the world’s goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses to help? Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action. And by this we will know that we are from the truth...because we obey God’s commandments and do what pleases him. And this is his commandment, that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us.”

John tells us that we can understand something about the mechanics of God’s love in this man Jesus. Who constantly emptied himself out in love for the sake of the other because this is what God does. God could have kept all of the vastness of divine goodness and love to himself, but the nature of that love is such that it has to be shared. So in an outpouring of love he creates the universe- the world- and all of us in it. And when we failed to understand that love by the means he had given us, in another act of self-emptying, he set aside his power and glory and came down to teach us something about it himself in Jesus. And what we see in Jesus is one who set aside his self interest, his self-centeredness, even his own self-preservation, in order to turn to the needs of others and by doing this took the gospel into the world. In order to demonstrate with his own life the good news that God would go to any length to meet us where we are and redeem us there because we could never possibly work our way up to him. It’s that constant sharing of ourselves in immediate, concrete, and specific ways that we take away from the example of Christ. But this is not just an example that we’re invited to emulate- John speaks of this as a command.

The command of God is to live as we have seen him live, which does not mean overly spiritualized notions of faith that allow us to float somewhere above the earth with its grit and responsibilities. It does not mean being content to preserve the interests only of each other's souls. And it does not mean getting our praise and worship on only to slip back into our modes of self-preservation and self-fulfillment the moment we walk out the doors of the sanctuary. It means rolling up our sleeves and getting real about love and about living into the command of love in the world. For it is one thing to be shaped by God's love, but it is quite another to be obedient to it. And it is obedience to the command of love that John is challenging his hearers with. It means there must be a physical expression to our worship- worship is not just about what we feel in the church but what we do outside of it. It means there is a physical expression to the compassion we feel in our hearts when we witness suffering. It means there is a physical reality to be pursued in tangible ways behind all of those words about poverty and righteousness and justice. It means putting flesh on the reality of God's love until what we know about Christ's witness and what we see in the world are one in the same.

Within the first hundred years of church history, the zeal of the original disciples had faded but began to be replaced by something else. Historians of the day note that the single most persuasive element of this bizarre new religion in Rome was not its itinerant preachers or its miracle workers healing in the name of Jesus who were actually several of many already on the streets of Rome, but it was the (quote) "conduct of early Christians, the "language of love" on their lips and in their lives...Christians were expected to belong, body and soul, to Christ, and this was to show in their conduct. In the general mood of Rome at the time... this demeanor could not help but be noticeable." As one more recent philosopher writes, "In this macabre world, submerged in despair, perversity, and superstition, something new existed and grew: Christianity, bastion of love for God and brother, of the Holy Spirit, and of hope for God's coming reign." Our world today needs Christians to respond to the call to live in love, not just to speak in abstractions or generalities about God's presence and love. Not just to understand love as a feeling, but to take it up as a lifelong discipline. To take the challenge of modeling self emptying love to heart moment to moment. And to take the power we have to choose how we will be in relationship to others and commit to modeling our lives on Christ- be it with our spouses, our friends, a stranger in the street, or halfway around the world. This is not just the call- it is the command. "For this reason the father loves me," Jesus once told his disciples, "because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my father." Amen.