

“Truth in Action”

April 21, 2024

First Christian Church

Scripture Text: 1 John 3:16-24

How do you define love? There is tough love, romantic love, toxic love, Christian love, making love, agape love, friendship love, family love. It is a huge concept with far-reaching implications. But how do we define it? When we look to the Scriptures for help, we normally go to 1 Corinthians 13, the love chapter. A year ago at this time we were in the middle of “40 Days of Love” with Rich Warren to explore that chapter. But strangely enough, 1 John talks about it even more than 1 Corinthians. In your pew Bible, 1 John is only 3 ½ pages long, but mentions the word “love” 33 times. Even though 1 Corinthians is 4 times as long at 13 ½ pages, and contains the famous “love chapter”, it mentions love less than half as many times – 13 to 1 John’s 33. 1 John uses the word “love” more than Matthew, Mark and Luke combined. So I guess what I am saying is 1 John has a definite focus on love.

But like I said, love is a huge concept with far reaching implications. And that is still true when we narrow it down to being a Christian. Back in 2012, before the angry chasm was firmly chiseled between democrats and republicans in America, CNN posted a quiz on its website entitle, “Do you believe in a red state Jesus or a blue state Jesus?” The quiz had you answer a series of questions about how you read the Gospels and understand the message and meaning of Jesus and, by the nature of your answers, the quiz would tell you whether you believe in a Jesus who would support American Republican values (red state) or American Democrat values (blue state). To oversimplify, the republican leaning Christians tended to focus on John 3:16 and right belief – Jesus came to bring salvation to those who believe. The democrat leaning Christians tended to focus more on right action – summed up in Matthew 25:40, “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.” Of course you and I both know the CNN quiz is flawed because it forces people to choose between Christian belief and Christian action, which makes no sense. It would be like saying marriage is either about the husband or the wife. But marriage isn’t about the husband or the wife, it is about the couple, it is about their relationship, about their ability to complement each other and hold one another up. Red and the blue, faith and action, husband and wife; trying to make it about one at the expense of the other is a travesty which can only lead to brokenness and the destruction of them both. Faith in Jesus Christ leads to loving action and loving action leads to faith in Jesus Christ. Separating the two is not an option or both are lost.

First John’s celebration of love helps us see that. To begin with, John’s definition, or better yet, John’s picture of love comes to us in verse 16, “We know love by this, that Jesus laid down His life for us”. This is how we know what love is. This is the definition of love.

A couple things we see here: to begin with, Jesus loved us first. Jesus didn't wait for us to get it right then come as a reward. Jesus didn't put Himself at the finish line and say, "when you learn how to behave, when you show me by your actions that you have learned to love, when you have conquered temptation and greed; then I will bring you home." No, Jesus came to us, met us where we are, and while we were yet sinners, died for the ungodly. Jesus loved first. That is why a parent image is so powerful for Jesus' love for us. The good parent loves their child even before it is born. While the baby is still being formed, the mother is changing her life for the sake of the baby – not drinking alcohol, eating right, taking vitamins. Meanwhile the dad is busy making room in the house for the new family member, trying to put together the crib and figuring out how the stroller opens up and collapses again. One day I went to visit my academic advisor in seminary, and he had a little sleeping pallet made up in the corner of his office. When I commented that the bed looked a little too small for him, he told me about the little girl they were adopting from Africa, and how he hadn't met her yet, but he loved her with every bone in his body. It doesn't matter how the baby comes, when it comes, the parents sacrifice sleep, money, routine, adult relationships and basic sanity to this little life that doesn't even know they exist. Someday the baby will recognize them and may even love them, that is until they become teenagers when they will try and deny the existence of the ones in whose image they were created. Oh no, that is not teenager's sin, that is humanity's. Anyway, my point is the parent loves first. Before the infant is capable of recognizing them, even before it is born, the parent is loving them.

But for a parent to be able to give so sacrificially, they have to be in a good place. You and I have seen too many parents who think a baby is a wonderful little gift to them, that will make them feel happy and give them unconditional love; and when that infant comes home and is nothing but a loud, demanding, expensive, food processing machine; they lose it and start complaining about being a slave to a baby that is all take and no give. Yea, it is true. The parent can't be dependent on the baby to make it feel like parenting. The baby's wellbeing is dependent on parent, not the other way around. The parent has to be good before taking on the baby. They have to be in a place where they can give without return. Ideally that good place is established through the love and support of a spouse and family and community and God, all there to lift up the parent so the parent can sacrifice for the child.

Jesus sacrificed His life for us. He was already in a good place. He knew His mission. He knew the love of God. He knew death on the cross was going to be the worst thing, but not the last thing. He knew life waited on the other side. And because He knew in the deepest part of His knower that God was going to bring Him through, He could lay down His life for us. And when we believe in Him, when we have faith that God will pull us through whatever we are going through, when we know in the deepest part of our knower that with God, life wins, when we can recognize that with God, we have all we need; then we are ready for the second half of

verse 16. “We know love by this, that He laid down His life for us (now here is the second part) —and we ought to lay down our lives for one another.”

This is where the world messes with us. To be able to lay our lives down for one another, we — just like the parent — have to be in a good place. But the world messes with that definition. The world wants to define that good place as a feeling of importance and significance as compared to other people. So we try to set ourselves apart from other people. We stack up achievements where we show we are better than others in order to separate us from them. We put others down, we erect physical and emotional walls of isolation both with nice neighborhoods and with gossip, subtle innuendos, backbiting, generalizations and questioning their motives. In all these ways we try to attain what God wants for us, a sense of being worthwhile and important. But putting others down to feel better about yourself and using separation and judgement to build self-worth will never get us there, because it is always dependent on building more. How can we “lay down our lives for one another” when we need everything we have plus more to keep us in a good place?

First John says you can't. Being in a good place is not about what you can accomplish. It is about faith. Being in a good place is knowing your mission, knowing you are loved by God, knowing death may not be a good thing, but it is not the last thing. It is about knowing life is waiting on the other side. About knowing in the deepest part of your knower that God is going to bring you through. That is the good place — the place of peace, the place of hope, the place of love — a place only faith can bring us to. And it is from there that we can lay down our lives for one another.

And 1 John tells us exactly what that means. “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 help? Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.” Now when it says, “has the world's goods”, it is talking about the necessities of life — food, water, basic shelter. John is not talking to millionaires who have everything they want or can imagine. He is talking to who has a little bit more food than they need today. Laying down your life is not about a great heroic gesture like scooping up a child from the path of a speeding car or disarming a gunman or taking a bullet for the president. No, it is more painful than that. It is more painful than taking the bullet for someone else because most of us will never have the opportunity to do that. But we do have the opportunity to love a person in need. Not because you will get something in return. Not because it will make you feel good. Not because they deserve the help and will pay you back. Not because you have so much time and emotional energy and food that you won't miss it. No, we love first, just like Jesus. We the strong, bend to the weak and love them right where they are. Just like Jesus, we love first. “We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another.” And laying down our

lives means anyone who has enough food, water, and basic shelter for today needs to share with those who don't. "Let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action."

Right belief leads to right action and right action leads to right belief. The two cannot be separated. Verse 23, "And this is God's commandment, that we should believe in the name of His Son Jesus Christ and love one another." May it be so.

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