

"Beyond Warm Fuzzies" – April 26, 2015

1 John 3:16-24

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As we enter the fourth week of Easter we continue to reflect upon the meaning of the action of Jesus Christ on our behalf. He freely chose to submit to death on cross in order to restore a right relationship between God and humanity. His blood was a sign of the new covenant, the final covenant, between us and God. This is described as an act of love, the ultimate act of love.

In the Gospel Lesson, Jesus calls himself the Good Shepherd, the one who so loves his flock, he would lay down his life for them. The shepherd is different from the hired hands who flee at the first sign of trouble. Hired hands aren't paid to love. Hired hands run away when the wolves come and threaten the sheep. They fear for their own lives. They care only about their own skins. But the shepherd has a vested interest in the sheep. They are his, they belong to him. In this passage Jesus describes an intimate relationship that binds the sheep to him. This is similar to the relationship between Jesus and God the Father. It is a oneness that can be difficult for us to imagine.

In this passage Jesus speaks of himself as the shepherd, laying down his life for his sheep. He does it on his own accord. No one takes his life from him, but he himself lays it down. He does this out of love for his sheep – those he already has, and those who are not yet part of this flock – his current sheep and his future sheep. This action is the ultimate act of love.

We are called to follow Jesus, but we don't always understand what that really means. In his translation of the Bible called *The Message*, Eugene Peterson writes in his introduction to the letters of John, "The two most difficult things to get straight in life are love and God. More often than not, the mess people make of their lives can be traced to failure or stupidity or meanness in one or both of these areas. The basic and biblical Christian conviction is that the two subjects are intricately related. If we want to deal with God the right way, we have to learn to love the right way. If we want to love the right way, we have to deal with God the right way. God and love cannot be separated."

This morning I'd like to focus on our passage from 1 John to help us understand a little more of what this connection between God and love looks like. It's a relatively short passage but it contains a lot of substance. You might want to follow along in your pew bible.

There are several themes running throughout this passage that are instructive for us. The first is we cannot say that we love God if we avoid helping those who are in need. Christ's very action of laying down his life for us is an object lesson in what it means to love. Jesus put aside his own life on behalf of all of us. Just as Christ transcended his own self-interest, we are to follow his

example. Putting the needs of other people before our own, showing this type of self-sacrificing love to one another.

Does the writer mean this “laying down of one’s life” in a literal sense? Well, he clarifies what he means in verse 17. Those who “have” are expected to help those who “have not.” We often think of this as the giving of material aid to one who is in need, but there is more there. The English translation overlooks a Greek idiom present in the text – an idiom that refers to the showing also of compassion. So it’s not simply material aid, but also the showing of concern or kindness to the one in need. We don’t help others out of obligation but out of love.

Next the writer spells out the dilemma of how we define love. What exactly is love? It’s not about emotions or sentimentality or warm, fuzzy feelings. Nor is it about simply the offering of good wishes or sympathizing with one’s predicament. The love that is emphasized here is love that is acted out, not just talked about. Christ laying down his life for us was an action. Love goes way beyond mere words, beyond warm fuzzies. Love gets down into the muck of life and does something about it. Love embodies truth through action.

This action began in God. For it is only through God’s love for us that we are able to show love to others. When we do act in love, that is evidence that we belong to Christ. Because if Christ lives in us, that will be manifest in our actions toward others. His love flows through us, and impacts those whom we touch. Love in action finds its basis, its foundation in Christ. So if our actions show love, then we can trust that we truly reside in Christ. We know we belong to Christ – our loving actions assure us of that.

And this is important, because sometimes we need that reassurance. Our text speaks of instances where our heart condemns us. In other words – we experience times when we are faced with a dilemma of conscience. In the Bible, the heart is seen as the center of religious and moral conduct. And sometimes our heart condemns us. It may be easier for us to understand this as those times when we hear our conscience speaking to us. Sometimes that’s a good thing. Sometimes we need a little kick to get ourselves jump-started into action. But there’s a caution here as well.

Sometimes we find ourselves overwhelmed with guilt. That’s easy in a world that has so many problems and so much pain and suffering. We feel inadequate to the task before us. We view the path of discipleship as an impossibility. We throw up our hands in frustration. We think we have to be perfect, yet we constantly fall short. We feel guilty for having so much when so many in this world have so little. And the little that we do accomplish seems barely a drop in the bucket. Some people live in this debilitating guilt. Some churches even prey upon this tendency within us, using shame to coerce action. Possibly you’ve experienced people who have used this technique.

The bottom line is that a gentle nudge from our conscience to inspire us to action is probably a good thing. But living in shame and guilt for what you haven't done is not healthy. The text here gives us the assurance that God is so much greater than our hearts. God knows everything that we do. If we do express our love for God by showing active love toward others, than those times that we fall into doubt or lapse in our faith, God can still see the big picture. The Christian life is full of inner conflict – each of us struggles as we try to live out our faith. But we don't always live an authentic life. God still loves even the most disobedient among God's children. God's mercy is greater than our unhealthy feelings of shame and guilt.

On the other end of the spectrum, we have those times of confidence. When we know we are living authentic lives, we can stand boldly before God. The text affirms that God will give us whatever we ask. Of course the condition here is that we are keeping God's commandments and are doing what is pleasing to God. It is implied that our requests to God would be in line with God's will. We can't simply pray for some random, self-serving thing and expect God to follow through.

When our will is aligned with God's will, we can stand boldly before God, knowing that God will answer our requests. Again, Jesus is the model for us. Everything he did was done according to God's will for his life. Even while he lamented in the Garden of Gethsemane, for God to take the cup of death away from him, Jesus ultimately said, not my will, but yours. And in the prayer that Jesus taught us we find the phrase, "thy will be done."

Next John defines for us the commandment of God. In looking at the text it looks like two separate commands. Listen to it again. John writes, "And this is the commandment, that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us." Believe in Jesus Christ and love one another – two things. Yet John says, it is one commandment.

Because, for John, you can't have one without the other. Both faith in Jesus and love for others are interconnected. He cannot conceive of one existing without the other. Biblical scholar C. Clifton Black describes this as a double-pronged commandment. One prong is theological in nature, believing in Jesus Christ, and the other prong is ethical in nature, active love for one another. These two components are inseparable. (The New Interpreter's Bible, p. 422-423)

And then the text brings us back where we started. When active love is manifest in our lives it is proof that we are abiding in Christ and that he abides within us. It is the Spirit of Christ that dwells within us. Active love for others is a natural part of the life of faith. It is not us doing these things. It is the Spirit of God working through us. The love that we show toward others is the evidence of our relationship to Christ and his Spirit dwelling within us.

One time during my former call I worked at our local food pantry with some folks from other local churches. We had recently seen a rise in the number of people coming in for help. One of my church members made an observation - that it really put things into perspective by physically being there at the pantry, seeing the people, talking to them, listening to their stories, and helping them with a couple bags of food. There is something about being up close and personal with folks that puts this whole idea of active Christian love into perspective. You begin to understand that you're part of something much bigger when you can see how your actions can impact the lives of others for good.

Today's message is a simple one. You've probably heard it many times before. It is not some grand revelation or new bit of wisdom that you can take home and carry around with you this week. Rather it is a message that permeates the New Testament. It's another reminder to us of who we are – a description of our identity as Christians. Believe in Jesus Christ and love one another. If we say we follow Christ then that should be evident in how we treat each other.

And this doesn't just mean for a few hours on a Sunday morning. It has to do with our identities at all times. This means that it impacts all areas of our lives. Our politic viewpoints – how does believing in Jesus Christ and loving one another affect how we see immigration issues or respond to the huge chasm between the political right and the political left? It impacts the social arena – how does our Christian identity affect our response to poverty, racism, and injustice, both in the world and in our own backyards. The area of economics – what would our checkbooks or our spending habits tell about our identity as Christians? How about entertainment – how do spend our free time, what activities do we engage in on a regular basis?

When we start getting serious about following Christ, we learn for ourselves that it's no easy task and there are no easy answers. Several years ago the youth culture of the church adopted those little plastic wrist bands with the initials WWJD on them. It stands for "What Would Jesus Do?" It was a way for young people to remind themselves that their identity as Christians was to take center stage. The wrist bands were a simple device to help them become more intentional about living out their faith in their daily lives. Though I have never had one of those bracelets, I sometimes catch myself, in the midst of a difficult choice or sticky situation, asking silently, "What would Jesus do?"

Doing that doesn't mean an answer to your dilemma will magically appear, but it is a way of focusing the decision making process and of opening yourself to the leading of the Holy Spirit. I am not suggesting that you all run out and buy one of those wrist bands. However, I would encourage you to become more intentional about your faith. In a world that does its best to try to make us forget our identities as Christians, I challenge all of us to embrace our identities as those who have freely chosen to follow Christ. As we become more intentional in our faith journeys, allowing the Holy Spirit to dwell within us, we will become more loving to others. And

as we act in love toward others, our faith in Jesus Christ will grow. As John wrote, faith and loving actions are inseparable. You simply can't have one without the other.