

Love Embodied
January 28, 2024
1 John 3:16-24
Rev. Laurie Crelly – East Church UCC
Grand Rapids MI

Last week I introduced our series about the Great Commandment from Mark 12: 29-30

‘Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’ The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’

Now as I pointed out last week. It is significant that Jesus uses two different commandments from two different books of the Torah to answer the Scribe’s question fully “what is the greatest commandment?” This answer ties these two commands together reminding us that we cannot fully love God unless we also love our neighbor as ourselves. It shows us that there is both a vertical and horizontal love at work here. Similar to the way we find our balance on a beam. We need be centered on the beam which is obtained when we hold our arms out and keep our eyes looking forward to the goal. I believe that John’s Epistle seeks to show us how to find that balance and strengthen our love in the process.

When you read John’s Epistle you may notice that it differs from Paul’s letters in several ways. Paul’s letters were often addressed to a specific group of believers for a particular reason or issue he wanted to address and had the traditional format of a letter of the times. Whereas John’s letter is absent of any identifiers to help us place when and who the intended audience is. According to Dr. Sherri Brown of Luther Seminary,

“John’s epistle is written more like a sermon and in part to clarify the meaning of John’s Gospel for a community which reads that gospel as its central guide to faith and action.”

She goes onto say “This text from 1 John 3:16-24 is the focal point of John’s Epistle, which lays out the new covenant commandment within the central appeal to the new community. The primary directive is that God is just. The author is further insistent that the new community is formed upon Jesus Christ’s commandments of believing and loving in Jesus that leads to an outward-turning orientation toward social justice. The trajectory is a theology that leads to Christology, which forms an ecclesiology that manifests ethical action.”

If you are not familiar with these terms a Christology is our theology or belief about the nature and role of Christ. Ecclesiology is our theology or belief about the nature and structure of the Christian Church or community.

So John’s epistle is preaching about how we live out our faith in ethical action as a fulfillment of this Great Command. How do we expand in our love for one another as expressions of God’s love for us? How do we embody love and lead an outward-turning orientation of our faith? These are the questions I want us to consider today.

As we look at the words here in Chapter three of John’s Epistle, we see four expressions of this love for one another; compassion, sacrifice, truth and action. This list spells out the details of how one loves others as Jesus loves us. The opening of this epistle states, “If we say that we have fellowship with God while we are walking in darkness, we lie and do not do what is true; but if we walk in the light as God is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus cleanses us from all sin.” (1 John 1:6-7) This opening statement reveals that this is a way of life for the believer. Walking in the light means to seek after and follow truth that leads us to repentance.

In chapter three John calls on us to be ready to sacrifice ourselves, even to the point of death if necessary. He even points to Jesus as one who gave the ultimate sacrifice of his life for the world. This may not be something we can do immediately as new believers. But when we operate from a place of compassion and love we find many

other ways we can make sacrifices, both easy and painful ones, that express love and care for others as God commands. This is an exercise or practice of faith that builds our spiritual muscle to care for others. A self-sacrificial act that reflects God's love in the world. That is where John's second point comes in. He says "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?" He is asking, how can we have the means but not the heart to share with others in need? Throughout the Book of Acts and the stories of the early church giving to those in need, sharing resources and holding all things in common were standard expectations of believers. In Acts chapter 2, following the day of Pentecost, we read,

"All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. . . . And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved." (Acts 2:44-45, 47).

This continued as a common practice of the church. Still today, the mission of the church includes a component of compassionate care ministries for both members and non-members. Here at East Church, we have offered compassionate ministries such as a food pantry, being a temporary homeless shelter with IHN, and even helping with refugee resettlement programs in our recent past. Along with dedicating a portion of our total budget to support other ministries meeting the needs of the Grand Rapids community and beyond.

Yet John's critique "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?" begs the question, how often do we allow property and goods to supersede the needs of human dignity and life? Compassion and sacrifice are active expressions of love for our neighbor. Some would argue that the depth of our sacrifice reflects the depth of our love. How sacrificial

are we willing to be with our privilege, luxury, or comfort so that others might simply live with their basic needs met? Or do we turn a blind eye to the inequities visible all around us because it makes us uncomfortable to admit our complicity in the pain and suffering of others? This is where the virtues of truth and action come in.

Repentance is possible when we can see the truth and accept our responsibility for the roles our actions have played in that. Confessing our sins is not a one-time thing. It is a daily discipline of soul searching, truth telling and confession. We see it in the Lord's prayer. We include it in our weekly worship, a time of self-examination and confession. It is a core faith practice. Truth telling, truth seeking and self-reflection of the impact of our words and actions is part of loving one another more.

The word repentance means to turn around. When we admit our actions, even good, intentioned actions that have actually brought harm, it is necessary to confess and repent, change our ways, to act differently so as to reverse the impact upon others. John's epistle was seeking to address something that almost every church community faces. A division in the church where people are not coming together as one body of faith seeking to fulfill Jesus' command to love God and love one another. His words call us to grow in compassion, self-sacrifice, truth and action. These are universal principles we can exercise within our spiritual practices of service and generosity.

So let us hear John's words to the church. Turn our hearts toward one another, toward a hurting world just outside these walls and all around the world. Let our compassion grow, our self-sacrifice dig deep, and our actions truthfully proclaim the Good News of God's unfailing love to heal and redeem the world.

Holocaust Memorial Day Prayer

January 27th marks 79th the anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau, the largest Nazi Death Camp. Yesterday, communities around the world marked this day to remember the 6 million Jews murdered during the Holocaust, alongside the millions of people murdered under Nazi persecution of other groups and during more recent genocides in Cambodia, Rwanda, Bosnia and Darfur.

The Holocaust threatened the fabric of civilization, and genocide must still be resisted every day. Our world often feels fragile and vulnerable and we cannot be complacent. Even in the United States, prejudice and the language of hatred must be challenged by us all.

Together we bear witness for those who endured genocide, and honor the survivors and all those whose lives were changed beyond recognition. We lift our voices with loving people everywhere and say Never Again. Never Again.

The following prayer was written by Chief Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis, Archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby and Senior Imam Qari Asim have come together and written a special prayer which is intended to be used by people of any faith. It is published on the Holocaust Memorial Day Trust website of the United Kingdom.

Loving God, we come to you with heavy hearts, remembering the six million Jewish souls murdered during the Holocaust.

In the horrors of that history, when so many groups were targeted because of their identity, and in genocides which followed, we recognize destructive prejudices that drive people apart.

Forgive us when we give space to fear, negativity and hatred of others, simply because they are different from us.

In the light of God, we see everyone as equally precious manifestations of the Divine, and can know the courage to face the darkness.

Through our prayers and actions, help us to stand together with those who are suffering, so that light may banish all darkness, love will prevail over hate and good will triumph over evil. Amen.