

“Love is an Action”

1 John 3:16-24 NRSV

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Central UMC

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“¹⁶We know love by this, this he laid down his life for us-and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. ¹⁷How 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?*

¹⁸Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action. ¹⁹And by this we will know that we are from the truth and will reassure our hearts before him ²⁰whenever our hearts condemn us; for God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything. ²¹Beloved, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have boldness before God; ²²and we receive from him whatever we ask, because we obey his commandments and do what pleases him.

²³And 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. ²⁴All 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.”

“Love is in Action.” The Apostle John tells us that, “We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us-and we ought to lay down our lives for one another.” But what does that really mean? Is John really saying that we must lay down our lives?

For Jesus it ultimately meant death on a Cross. And sometimes, for us, self-sacrifice can mean physical death, but more often than not, the stakes are lower. But the principal is the same.

We lay down our hold on our lives when we put others first. We lay down our lives when we live for the good of others. We lay down our lives when we take time for others. To love others is to lay down our lives for them.

When we lay down our completely normal human desire to live for ourselves, and when we instead allow the love of God to reorient us toward the needs of others, we are laying down our lives. And there is nothing more beautiful in all the world!!!

In our Scripture Lesson for this morning, we can see that John was pretty hard on Christians who say they have the love of Jesus in their hearts but don’t share their material goods with those in need... What would he say to you; what would he say to me?

John goes on to write in verse 18, “let’s not love with words or speech but with action and truth.” In other words, love is not only a word—it’s an action. And laying down one’s life, in this passage, is responding to people in need.

In Matthew 21: 28-32, Jesus tells us a parable. In that parable he tells of a man that asks each of his sons to go into the vineyard to work. The first son answers that he will not go, but later he

repents and goes into the vineyard to work. The second son answers that he will go to work, but he does not go into the vineyard. The second son responds to his father's request in word only. The first son, even though at first, he said no; repents and goes, and by doing so...loves his father with action.

When it comes to love, Jesus is never just talk. He is first and always a doer. Someone Who actually serves. How can we claim to receive the love of God in our life, if we do not show love in our actions?

It has been said that many Christians today claim they believe in Jesus Christ, but tend to only act like him when it benefits them. By that, they mean they believe the truth of the Gospel, but do not practice that truth. But what is the truth of the Gospel if you don't believe that living a life of sacrificial love by caring for those without the need of affirmation? Believing in Christ means believing that Christ saves us by making us like Himself, and last I checked Jesus did not love for his benefit, but for ours.

Faith and love are bound together in one package, are they not? You can't have one without the other.

In Mother Teresa's biblical mindset, when we love others, we love Jesus. She said, "At the end of life we will not be judged by how many diplomas we have received, how much money we have made, how many great things we have done. We will be judged by: I was hungry and you gave me [something] to eat. I was naked and you clothed me. I was homeless and you took me in."

When Jesus says, "...just as you did it to one of the least of these whom are members of my family, you did it to me" (Matthew 25:40 NRSV). When we ignore the hungry, the naked, the homeless, the marginalized, the oppressed, the hopeless...we ignore Jesus. Is that the walk of faith you desire? I hope not because that is not what God calls us to do as followers of Jesus.

You see when we come to those in need, we are coming to Jesus, and when we meet the poor, the hungry, the alone, the naked, the downtrodden, and the hopeless. We are in fact meeting Jesus in the most distressing disguise. How will you treat those in need? With disdain because they are not worth your time or because they can't give you anything in return? Or through loving them with action and helping them in any way that you can?

I hope you choose the latter. Now there is no doubt that we will falter. We won't get it right every time, but loving and serving is a natural reflex of the love of God living in us, working through us.

In his book, Run with the Horses, Eugene Peterson tells how he saw a family of birds teaching their young to fly. Three birds were perched on a dead branch that stretched out over a lake.

"One adult [bird] got alongside the chicks and started shoving them out toward the end of the branch—pushing, pushing, pushing. Till the end one fell off. Somewhere between the branch and the water four feet below, the wings started working, and the fledgling was off on his own."

Peterson writes, "Birds have feet and can walk. Birds have talons and can grasp a branch securely. They can walk and cling. But flying is their characteristic action, and not until they fly are they living at their best, gracefully and beautifully."

It's similar with a person. Giving and loving is what we do best. It's the air into which we are born. It is the action that was designed into us before we were born. Some of us try desperately to hold on to ourselves, to live for ourselves. And sometimes we don't think we can live generously because we have never tried, or think that we are not able to give enough. But the sooner we start, the better, for we are going to have to give up our lives, and the longer we wait, the less time we have for the soaring and swooping life of grace.

I saw a bumper sticker last month that said, "Whoever dies with the most toys wins." However, the truth about life is: "Whoever dies with the most toys loses."

You see, you can have three houses, nine cars, a handful of watches, big screen TVs, laptops, tablets, trampolines, pools, motorbikes, ATVs, campers, granite countertops, chandeliers, top of the line kitchen appliances, even an old heirloom that's been in your family for four generations. Guess what happens when God calls you home? You leave all of that here...you don't get to take it to heaven. Look at the Pharaohs and the Kings of antiquity. They were buried with treasures and nice things...and the only people that benefited from that were the grave robbers.

It is through sacrificing our time and resources that shows love in action. It is through our giving, THAT love in action, that we store up treasures in heaven...and I'm not going to lie, if one of my treasures could be a trampoline? I'd be ok with that.

At its core, loving service is not something we do for ourselves. When it is just self-motivated, it tends to be sporadic, done only when it's convenient for us. This is what John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist Movement, called "the doctrine of the devil"—doing good when you feel like it.

Some of us have little bursts of good works at Thanksgiving or Christmas, but people are hungry in April, homeless in September, malnourished in July. Real love in action is regular, constant and a normal part of our lives.

That is what John is talking about when he says, "This is how we will know that we belong to the truth..." Isn't it awesome to know that the measure of whether or not we are God's children is whether or not our lives are orientated outward—toward others—in love?

Whether or not we are becoming like God is measured by how much we empathize with our fellow humans. It's measured by our generosity, and it's measured by whether or not we lay our lives down for others. Because that is what God does and is!!! That's the kind of God we have!!!

John tells us in verse 23, that the command for our lives is to "believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another."

That's right, it's all about God. It's all about grace.

In Ephesians we are told that we are saved by grace through faith, not by works or something we have accomplished, and that even this faith is a "gift" from God. So that none of us can boast about ourselves.

And then it says, "we are God's accomplishment, created in Christ Jesus to do good things. God planned for these good things to be the way we live our lives."

What a way to live. It's the only way to live!!! And I don't think I'm stating anything new here when I say that poverty, homelessness, and hunger are very regular today. We see it everywhere, but how we react, and act in love can mean a lot to those who are in need.

Shane Claiborne, one of the founding members of The Simple Way, a Christian community in Philadelphia describes how God has revealed God's self to him through the homeless.

"I saw a street kid get 20 bucks panhandling outside of a store and then immediately run inside to share it with all of his friends," writes Claiborne. "We saw a homeless man lay a pack of cigarettes in the offering plate because it was all he had." "We met a little 7-year-old girl who was homeless, and we asked her what she wanted to do when she grew up. She paused pensively and then replied, 'I want to own a grocery store.'" Claiborne asked her why and she said, "So I can give out food to all the hungry people."

Hunger is everywhere. Not just for food though...Hunger for love, hunger for belonging, hunger for employment, hunger for hope, hunger for compassion, hunger for kindness, hunger for listening and understanding, and hunger for a place they feel welcomed.

What hunger can we satisfy? How can we feed the hungry of the world? When God creates saving faith in our hearts, God creates active love in our lives. And thus, we begin the transformation of becoming the people God created us to be.

I love how involved this church is with the community. Every month's Shareback is just one of the many ways this church gives back to the community, but also with the Blessings Box, and even the way this church came together with the ties for Monroe High School, which was probably 75 or more by the way. I see the way this church works with other churches in the community, and other programs like Common Heart.

My personal favorite is Dinner Church. Every week I see not only the church family come for the prayer we say before we get started, but others who come from the community come to pray with us as well. I see the way that people are getting to know others that they probably wouldn't in their day to day lives.

And the best part of it all is that I see love in action. I see the church doing more than just eating and listening to Jack's wonderful devotionals. I see the church helping those in need, and you know how that happens? You all listen. You listen to the needs of the people and you do what you can to help them...That's love in action.

We all need that love in our lives, no matter where in life you find yourself. We are all in need of love from one another that comes from Jesus Christ. We put our faith in that love, and so...in a nutshell...We cannot believe in Jesus without believing in love, and we cannot have love without action.

And the good news is that when we act lovingly, we can be assured that nothing less than the love of God in Jesus Christ is pulsing through our hearts and hands. When we love, we are one with Christ, and Christ abides in us!!! Amen.