

April 25, 2021

Texts: Psalm 23; 1 John 3:16-24

Title: “Real Love”

We all know that there are certain physical characteristics that are totally unique to each individual. Your fingerprints, for example, are entirely unique—no one else has the same ones as you do. The pattern of your iris, the colored part of your eye, is also totally unique. So is your DNA. But did you know that your heartbeat is completely unique too? Every person on earth has a different heartbeat pattern, or “cardiac signature.” So, if someone can measure your “cardiac signature,” they can identify you by it. Now, let’s apply that to our faith,

Our scripture lesson for this morning, 1 John 3:16-24 makes that clear. The heartbeat of the Christian is to love others with the sacrificial love of Jesus. Not a warm and fuzzy feeling. Not with good intentions or encouraging words. But with loving actions. Actions that cost us something. As verse 18 reads, “...let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.” I guess what he’s saying here is that talk is cheap. Real love, on the other hand, is costly.

This passage was written to encourage church people to be more loving toward one another and to those in need. If we can’t do that, John tells us, we’ve missed the very heart of the faith that Christ gave us.

Al Lingren, a professor at Garrett Theological Seminary, was talking with his teenage son one day when he said, “Dad, what is the toughest thing God ever tried to do?” There’s a lot of things that they don’t cover in seminary and that question is one of them. Professor Lingren wracked his brain for an answer, then

asked his son, “What do *you* think it was?”

The boy said, “Since taking science in school, I thought the creation of the world might be the hardest thing God ever tried to do, and in Sunday school we got to talking about some of the miracles, and I thought the resurrection might be the toughest thing God ever tried to do. But, after thinking about it some more, I decided that the toughest thing God ever had to do is *to get us to understand who He is and that He loves us.*”

I think that young man was on to something. The toughest thing God ever had to do is to get us to understand who He is and that He loves us.” How did God get us to understand who He is? First through the Law and the prophets. And then we learned much more through His coming to us in the flesh, in the person of Jesus Christ. And how did God get us to understand that He loves us? Through Christ’s death on the cross and rising again to new life for us all.

John, the disciple of Jesus who wrote these verses, knew that if he didn’t make it perfectly clear what Christian love looks like, we might want to define it differently. In verse 16, he writes, “We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us and we ought to lay down our lives for one another.”

Unfortunately, it’s not always easy to love, is it? Sometimes we will withhold love until someone passes our “approval test.” We love those who we think are deserving of our love—which is exactly the opposite of Jesus’ love. He didn’t love us because we were easy to love or we deserved it. He loves us with the very love of God.

So as Christ laid down his life for us, we are to lay down our lives for others. That means loving all people—even those who misuse us, and that means doing good to all people—even those whom we may not approve of, and that means that we will be challenged from time to time if we are serious about this stuff. The essence of Christian faith is love.

And another thing that's important to realize is that **love is our primary witness to the world. You know the old song, old now, "They will know we are Christians by Our Love."** If the day comes when the church is as loving as Christ, the world will beat a path to our door. John asks, "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?" And the answer is, it doesn't.

Frances Havergal was an English poet, pianist and hymn writer in the mid-1800s. Her most famous hymn is probably, "Take my life and let it be consecrated, Lord, to Thee." In each verse, she offers some part of her life for the Lord's service. Take my voice, take my hands, take my feet, take my love. She asks God to use every part of her life to make a difference for others.

The fourth verse of this hymn begins, "Take my silver and my gold, not a mite would I withhold." And she really meant it. In her journal, she wrote of packing up a jeweled cabinet that belonged to her family, along with other pieces worth a lot of money and sending them off to the Church Missionary Society to be used to fund missionaries in other countries. She wrote this, "I don't think I need tell you I never packed a box with such pleasure."

How do we know that Frances Havergal had a heart like Jesus? Because of the joy she got out of giving away her most valuable items for the sake of sharing the message of Jesus with strangers in another part of the world. She saw brothers and sisters in need, and she was determined to help them. Love is our primary witness to the world of our faith in Christ.

Love is more than just an emotion or a feeling. It's feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting the sick and imprisoned. Love is not a passive verb, but an active one. And it is the primary way that Christ will be known in this world. John Maxwell often says that "People don't care how much we know until they know how much we care." But there's one thing more that we need to see.

**Love is a gift from God.** Real love isn't natural for us it seems, but of God. Human nature is to take care of our own well-being. God's nature is self-giving love. The closer we are to God, the more that self-giving love becomes a part of who we are. There's an old episode of the TV show "The Twilight Zone" in which a gambler dies. He wakes up in a room full of gaming tables. And no matter what game he plays, he wins. A gambler's dream comes true! This must be heaven!

But as he goes from table to table, winning every game easily, he comes to realize that he didn't wind up in heaven at all, but the other place. You see, he had everything he ever wanted, but he didn't have anyone to share his winnings with.

Love is a gift God gives to us. It's multiplied and magnified **in us** when we give it away, when we can love others with the same sacrificial love that God showed

to us. We love because God first loved us. Amen.