

Sermon for Zion – June 28, 2020 – Letters of John, Part 3  
Hymns: Island Hymn; Brother, Sister, Let Me Serve You  
Scripture: Matthew 5:43-48; 1 John 3:11; 16-20  
Sermon Title: Love in Truth and Action

*Matthew 5:43-48 (NIV)*

*“You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.*

*1 John 3:11; 16-18 (NIV)*

*This is the message we have heard from the beginning: We should love one another. This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters. If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in that person? Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth.*

Poor John. He’s worked hard, sacrificed everything, given his life over to building these first churches, these fledgling communities of faith, has shared the story of Jesus, the eyewitness accounts of what he himself had experienced of the Master, of what Jesus taught and said and did, of how he died for all of us and was raised for all of us, how we can find new life in him and live as children of the light, sharing the love of God with all the world, and somehow, we kept getting it wrong. Kept missing the point. Kept taking the central, simple, purity of the message of Jesus – to love God with all we are and all we have, and to love our neighbour as ourselves - and somehow, that clear, straightforward, unambiguous message got muddled, complexified, confused. We needed to be brought back to the basics, to start all over again, and so John does just that, writing these letters to us, bringing us back to the beginning, back to the central kernel of our faith, back to Jesus.

To us, you say? He wrote these letters to us? He did. Here’s how he addresses these letters: *“Dear friends,”* he writes. That’s us. *“We proclaim to you*

*what we have seen and heard,*” he writes. To us. “*My dear children,*” he writes. That’s us too. And even more, we know that John is writing to us, and not just to the people of his day, because we too struggle to keep the message clear; we too struggle to love.

John knew this because Jesus knew this, and so said dozens of times in dozens of ways, “Love each other.” His great prayer, his great instruction, was that love for one another must follow our love for God. He demonstrated that with his life of unselfishness giving, he demonstrated it to his disciples in even washing their feet, he lifted himself up to the whole world on a cross, that all might see the horrible price of loving ones such as us, ones who are not used to love, are embarrassed by love, who live in a world where love seems a stranger.

And so we hear Jesus say, Love one another as I have loved you. And so we hear John say, love one another as he has loved you. And so we say, isn't that nice, and we look for a brief moment to the ones around us, and we search a moment for that sloppy feeling in our hearts that says "I love you," and it's not there, or if it is its so weak that it feels more like indigestion, and we look away thinking we've done our bit.

But love is more than the semi-sweet feeling we get when we look at teddy bears or Bambi or little puppies in the pet store window. Love as Jesus teaches it and as John taught it, love as they lived it, is far more. It is active compassion and concern, active reaching out and bringing together, active service. Love implies the willingness to take responsibility. When Jesus says, "Love as I've loved you," he is remembering sticking with those around him in good times and bad, encouraging them when they were down, rejoicing with them in their joy, giving both harsh words and soft when needed, teaching, caring, risking, forgiving, serving with all he had. John is remembering going to Ephesus even when it would have been easier to do something else, risking ridicule and rejection, seeing the good in all, sharing the word in patience and hope, speaking and encouraging till his voice was sore and his eyes burned from the smoky lamps and the cold damp walls of the prison seeped into his bones. When Jesus and John say love, they mean more than feeling. They mean doing.

For we serve an active God, not some totem of rock or wood, mute and staring. We serve a God who wants above all to show people a way out of the mess in which they have put themselves, a way out of the gloom and doom of life, which we can see is there in terrible ways, if we just have the courage to look at it as it

really is, and not hide reality behind a cloak of canned music and pretty facades. We all need a way out, a way to say "No" to the way of the world, the way of greed, of suspicion, of always putting ourselves first, of "to hell with the other guy."

That way out is love. God, in Christ, showed us how to love, on our turf, on our terms, in our form. Jesus showed us how to love in big, dramatic ways, like healing hopeless cases and feeding hungry crowds. He showed us in little, poignant ways, like weeping for his friend Lazarus, or at our lack of faith and hope for him. He taught this "love" to an unlikely collection of disciples; fishermen, tax collectors, taxpayers, and thieves, a thickheaded, stubborn bunch, slow to understand, quick to accuse, mired in discouragement - not entirely unlike ourselves - and this unlikely group applied the principle of love to a hostile empire, and it worked, because it had to work, because it was made to work, because it was made for us by Him who made us, who made our world, in the first place. And because we serve a living, active God, the love we are called to live is an active love.

But what does that mean? You either love somebody or you don't. And you are only obligated to love the people you actually do, well, love. Which is fine, as long as you are willing to disagree with Jesus, who said the following (Matthew 5:43-48):

*"You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.*

Paul, when he was explaining this principle to the Christians in Rome, who, like us, tended to think in terms not of spiritual obligations but of dollars and cents, put it this way (Romans 13:8-10):

*Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for whoever loves others has fulfilled the law. The commandments, "You shall not commit adultery," "You shall not murder," "You shall not*

*steal,” “You shall not covet,” and whatever other command there may be, are summed up in this one command: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” Love does no harm to a neighbor. Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law.*

We actually owe it to one another, says Paul, to love one another. And we owe it, because God in Christ has paid a tremendous debt of failure to love on our behalf – nailed it to the cross – and so now we, in response, owe a debt of love to the world. That is the one obligation, the one law, we are required to fulfill. And not just to the people we happen to love – we owe it to all the world. Even the people we find difficult to love. Or don’t love at all.

But by the time John writes his letters to us, he knows we somehow didn’t get the point either from the very straightforward words of Jesus, or from the helpful illustration from Paul. And so John writes, as clearly as he can:

*This is the message we have heard from the beginning: We should love one another. This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters. If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in that person? Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth.*

It couldn’t be more straightforward. The love we are called to share is not lip-service love (love with words or speech), but active love (with actions and in truth). True love – says Jesus, says John - is a love which results in action, whereas inactive love is the kind of love that doesn’t make a difference to anybody. And love that doesn’t make a difference to anybody isn’t much of anything at all. Elie Wiesel, the Jewish historian and expert on the Holocaust, has put it best:

*"The opposite of concern is not neglect, but indifference. The opposite of action is not inaction, but indifference. The opposite of creation is not chaos, but indifference. The opposite of love is not hate, but indifference. Indifference is a failure to love, and a failure to put love into practice."*

And indifference is the very thing out of which Jesus calls us, while making a difference, loving and putting that love into practice, is that to which we are called. For if there is an opposite to the Gospel, it is indeed indifference. It was Jesus who said, "Those who are not with me are against me." It was Jesus who said, "I wish you were hot or cold, but you are lukewarm, so I spit you out of my

mouth." Jesus never said "Leave me alone." Jesus always said, "Follow me." He doesn't say, "Don't." He says, "Do."

People in Jesus' day, particularly religious people, didn't much care for this idea of his. They had made a living, had made a life, dedicated to not doing certain things. Not eating certain foods, for instance; not associating with certain people; not working on the Sabbath. Lots of no's, which is what many of us think Christianity is all about. But that is not what Jesus thought. Jesus was under the impression (and you get the feeling it was the right one) that Christianity was not about what you don't do, but what you do, in fact, do. Christianity was, and is, all about how you respond to the love of God. It is all about meeting - and reacting to - Jesus Christ. It is about growing in love with Christ, and with one another. And it is about spreading that love around, putting that love into practice, and making a difference. It is an active, not a passive faith.

We are called to put love into practice starting with our own lives – to allow the love of God to transform us, and make us new.

We are called to put love into practice in our own homes, by leading lives of love, care and forgiveness within our own families, and bringing those closest to us ever closer to God. Active love, love which makes a difference, is the love our families need.

We are called to put love into practice in our churches – churches which need to be encouraged and inspired in the work they can do for Christ. But we need to recognize that our own churches are as needy of love – transforming love – difference making love – as anywhere else. We need to take a look around our own congregations, and see the hurt and loneliness and need that is there, and put our love into practice among those very people. John Calvin once said that there were as many lost and hurting souls within the doors of his Geneva church as there were without. Pessimistic, yes, but he has a point – every one of us can close our eyes and think of someone who sits ten feet from us every Sunday morning, who needs someone to reach out to them in love. This is particularly true in these days of pandemic and isolation. Who do you know who needs a phone call, a coffee, an encouraging word? When we put love into practice, we are sharing the love our own congregations need.

We are called to put love into practice in our communities, communities increasingly strangers to and even hostile to the Gospel. In an increasingly secular

age, our own communities, the villages and towns and cities in which we live, need missionaries sharing active love every bit as much as communities, villages and towns and cities anywhere in the world. How do we put that love into practice? Jesus tried to set it out for us as clearly as he possibly could, in the famous parable of the sheep and the goats (Matthew 25):

*“For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me... whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.”*

Love marked by compassion, justice and truth, love which transforms hearts and minds and even the basic attitudes and prejudices and assumptions of society itself, is the love our communities need.

And finally, we are called, as we always have been called, as we always will be called, to put love into practice in our mission to our world. It is so tempting to be overwhelmed with our own problems and limitations and worries in this Pandemic time. But my goodness, while it has brought difficulty to us, it has wrought horrific deprivation in many parts of our world. We need to remember the debt we owe to all people, and support the efforts of organizations such as the Canadian FoodGrains Bank, or Presbyterian World Service and Development, and other such agencies, providing them with the funds they need to do the work of God on our behalf. Generous love, love which gives hope of life and help and healing, is the love our world so desperately needs.

This is why John writes. And why he writes us. And so it is with his clear, straightforward, unambiguous words that I close:

*This is the message we have heard from the beginning: We should love one another. This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters. If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in that person? Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth.*

Thanks be to God; Amen.