

Wading River Congregational Church

SERMONS IN PRINT

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OCTOBER 22, 2006



1 John 3:11-24

"Love In Action"

Many years ago when I was a young assistant professor, the faculty were required to take "pedagogy" courses - which taught us how to teach - and one method I have never forgotten was called the "spiral approach": you go swiftly over the whole material, then come back and go over it again at a deeper level, and so on. John in his letter uses this method as he continues to circle over the question "What does it mean to be a Christian?" You already know his three answers: *to believe* in Jesus Christ as God's Son comes to earth, *to repent* of sin and lead a moral life, and *to love* one another as Jesus loved. In this section John comes back again to "the command you heard from the beginning" - that Christians should love one another.

1) *Like Christ, Not Like Cain*

But what does that mean, exactly? John in his usual black/white, light/darkness style sets up stark contrasts -Cain against Christ, children of the devil against children of God, hatred against love, death against life, murder against self-sacrifice. We may find the language too hyperbolic for us, but John was not only following 1st C. practice, but also emulating Jesus.

If you are a Christian, says John, you cannot be like Cain who killed his brother Abel - the first recorded murder in the Bible (Gen 4), the one that caused God to say "your brother's blood cries out to me from the ground." The roots of violence are all in that story: lack of self-knowledge and God-knowledge, resentment of being unappreciated, envy at another person's "success," hatred that festers until it erupts. The deep roots of all this, John says, are in the devil and his ways. Christians therefore should flee all this - they should, as Jesus made very clear, be careful with anger, refrain from derogatory speech, avoid contempt, refuse to let hate creep in - for to speak contemptuously or to hate someone else is to place ourselves under God's judgment (Mt 5:21-23).

Instead, Christians should take their cue from Jesus: they should love as he loved, and as he commanded. If we want to know how that is done, we should look at God's "love in action," and see Jesus' deliberate sacrifice of his life. He voluntarily "laid down his life for us," even as the Good Shepherd lays down his life to protect and defend his sheep. As John has said before, love is about self-sacrifice. Jesus' death was "for us" - his death atoned for our sin, and he rose again for our salvation - and so he did something

that can never be duplicated. But his death was also *an example* to us of how we should love one another – by “laying down our lives” for others.

That, says John, is extremely practical love – it is not warm feelings toward other people, it is not even “being prepared to sacrifice ourselves” for others, it is actually doing deeds of kindness and goodness for people in need. It means giving up something that we value, or is rightfully ours, for the sake of others. John is, I think, as crystal clear as Jesus was on this point. One Sunday this past summer I was watching the early morning TV preachers, and heard Californian pastor Dr. David Jeremiah preach on this text. He read this verse: “If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need, but has not pity on him, how can the love of God be in him?” (3:17). “Is there anyone here,” Dr. Jeremiah asked his congregation, “who does *not* understand that?”

This is not difficult to grasp! But of course we, like Christians of all generations, don’t always live up to our calling very well. Do *we* have material possessions? By any standards, yes! Whether we live in one room or in a mansion; have one or several houses; have cars and boats or not much more than a Social Security pension; we are all people with “material possessions” compared to most people in most places at most times in history. (If you doubt that, come down to the Thrift Store around noon on Saturdays!) As one Biblical commentator I read this week wrote, “if you can afford to buy this book,” *you* are one of the people John refers to as having “material possessions” (I. Howard Marshall).

The question, then, is are we prepared to part with our possessions to help people in need? As Christians, says John, that is our calling, and it is one of the signs of our faith. Belief brings about action – ideas have

consequences, as they say – and if we truly believe in and have put our trust in Jesus the Christ, who gave all for us; if we have what the Bible calls faith – then we will be *generous* people! We will have pity on people in need, and we will do practical things to help them!

Note that John is especially concerned that Christians should love “one another” – “brothers and sisters” in the faith. Christian love is meant not for “humanity” in the abstract, but for real people here and now; not for “all people everywhere,” but especially for fellow believers. “By this all will know you are my disciples, if you love one another,” said Jesus (John 13:35). In case we don’t get the point, let us make it plain: if we are Christians, we are called at least to love other Christians (loving our enemies is another story yet!). But too often, Christians who proclaim their “love for the world,” and even their generosity in meeting the needs of others, actively dislike fellow Christians, perhaps for expressing their faith in a different way!

2) *Troubled Hearts*

Now at this point in his letter, John breaks off into a parenthesis that is at first sight surprising, and even confusing. He starts to talk about troubled consciences.

He says that we can “know we belong to the truth” if we love in action and truth, and not merely proclaim our love in words. But his train of thought seems to lead him to consider that in the face of Jesus’ command to love sacrificially, Christians may find themselves with “troubled hearts,” which condemn them for not being more loving. Our consciences may not be at rest before God because we are not all we should be in love, in belief, or in morality. What should we then do? How can we find reassurance when we are troubled by our failure to live as Christians ought?

Of course our hearts may condemn us unjustly; our consciences are as distorted, confused, "fallen" as any other part of us – mind, body, emotions, will, affections – and they may accuse us of failure even when we really have nothing to feel guilty before God about. We may carry around shame and guilt that God has long forgiven and forgotten. We may be perfectionists who are never satisfied with doing "well enough;" compulsives who think we have never "done enough;" fearful people who secretly believe that we must live up to a certain standard or God will not love us. Our consciences may also be accused by "the accuser" and "father of lies," who would like nothing better than for Christians to be tied down by a thousand small threads of doubt and shame.

How can we be free from a nagging conscience? The question is a good one, but John's answer is a little difficult to understand – partly because his grammar and syntax are sometimes obscure. "This then," he says, "is how we know we belong to the truth and can set our hearts at rest.." (3:19). But what does he mean by "this then is how...?" Is he looking back to what he has just said? If so, he means that we can look at our love in action, and find reassurance in it. Our love is a sign of our faith, and we can be reassured – "this is how we know we have passed from death to life, because we love our brothers" (3:14).

But John's answer may lie in what follows: "*this* is how we can set out hearts at rest whenever they condemn us: *God is greater* than our hearts, and he knows everything" (3:20). Then our rest comes from trusting the God who knows us better than we know ourselves – and who is probably more merciful to us than we are to ourselves, or certainly to other people! Our rest comes from God's great love, knowledge, wisdom, compassion, protection, guidance,

perseverance. Our rest comes from knowing that he sent his Son into the world to save sinners like us, and that he counts us as righteous if we trust the One who was made a sin-offering for us.

We can have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ (Rom 5:1), and we can find confidence in his presence. We can have access to the Father, and find our prayers increasingly answered, as we learn to know and to do his will – a will which includes believing in his Son, and loving one another.

3) *Love In Action*

So how can you and I love in action and truth, and not just in words? What does God want you and me to do, here and now?

What are the immediate and pressing needs in our own fellowship? Or didn't you think there were any? If I told you there are people out of work, people about to lose their homes because they can't pay their mortgages, people who need constant care but can't find it or afford it, people shut in their homes by frailty, loneliness and depression, people dying of major illnesses, people struggling with degenerative diseases, people with deeply troubled children, people with drug and alcohol problems, people whose marriages are on the rocks – would you believe me, would you ask what you could do to help, or would you decide that these are problems for the Pastor and Deacons to deal with?

If other people's needs are any more complicated than lacking shoes or a winter coat, do we think they are beyond us, or none of our business? Do we think that our needs, and other people's needs, are so *private* that they cannot be discussed? Or that some government or professional agency should deal with them?

Or is the problem that nobody talks to anybody else on more than a superficial level, so we are unaware of each other's real needs? It is a sad fact of our hectic and affluent suburban lives that we know very little about one another. Most of us hardly know our next-door neighbors. Very few of us know much at all – perhaps not even the names – of people we have worshipped with week after week for years! How in the world are we going to love one another in practical and sacrificial action, when we don't even talk to other people in our church?

We cannot “pass the buck” on love for one another by putting money in the plate and hoping someone else will solve the problems. Somehow we need to deepen our Christian communities through talk, through prayer, through sharing our lives, until they become places where we know one another well enough to “love in action and truth.” So look around, and let us ask ourselves who needs attention, affection, support? Ask yourself who's missing from “your pew,” and why? Consider prayerfully how we can love, practically and sacrificially, our brothers and sisters in Christ as we are called to do.

Let us pray...