

Sermon
Community United Methodist Church of Coeur d'Alene
Sunday, April 21, 2024
10am

Text: 1 John 3:16-24

Theme: How Shall We Live: We Abide in Christ

[prayer]

How do little children express love?

Think of your children or grandchildren. If you have neither, think of a niece or nephew or a neighbor. If they are grown, think of them when they were small. How did they show affection?

My good friend Melanie has two children, L and E. L is eight and E is six. Melanie was the first of my friends to have children. When L was born, I flew all the way from North Carolina to Oregon so I could meet him. He was three weeks old. We nicknamed him Tree Frog because of his tiny bent legs.

E was born two years later. She and her brother have become my de facto niece and nephew. I see them every other year or so, and whenever I video chat with their mom, they usually appear on the screen to say hello and share something about their lives. Last month they were visiting their grandparents in Spokane and so I stopped by the house to say hi. E and L both gave me big hugs – the kind of hugs that children give – unrestrained, a little sloppy, full of enthusiasm and joy. They put their whole bodies into it. E then gave me a drawing she made, and L showed me his new Lego set.

L and E are old enough to tell me that they love me with their words. But the primary way little children express love is through their actions. A hug, a drawing, an invitation to play – they know intuitively that actions speak louder than words.

This Eastertide season we have been studying the words of 1 John as we consider how the good news of Jesus' resurrection changes how we live. The first week we recalled that we live in God's light rather than darkness, and we remain in the light

by confessing our sin. Last week we claimed our identity as God’s children and the responsibility to model our behavior after Jesus. This week we consider how we abide in Christ through our works of love.

The whole premise of 1 John is that God is love (4:8, 16). If we are children of God, then we are born of love. If we have God’s DNA in us, then we will love as God loves (4:7-8).

God’s testimony of love is a testimony of self-sacrifice. John 3:16: “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son” (CEB). The exact same chapter and verse in 1 John says something very similar: “This is how we know love: Jesus laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters” (1 John 3:16).

Christianity teaches that true love is expressed through self-sacrifice. God’s love is sacrificial. Jesus’ mission reached its climax not in words and speech, but in an act of self-sacrifice.

Our culture has a lot of respect for public servants like soldiers and first responders who put their lives on the line for others. We expect extraordinary actions of self-sacrifice from these professions. But for Christians, self-sacrifice should be *ordinary*, not extraordinary. If we are God’s children, and God’s love is self-sacrificial, then our love should be too. We accept that imitating Jesus may come at great cost, even the cost of our lives.

I have been thinking about this a lot because of the recent violent threat against churches in our community. Our public witness to the inclusive love of God may very well attract violence. Are we prepared to die for our witness? The Coeur Team takes our congregation’s safety seriously and will not take unnecessary risks. But recent events are a sober reminder that Christians throughout history have followed in the footsteps of their Lord and Savior by dying for their beliefs. If we think we are exempt from this potential fate, then we misunderstand the Gospel. When we stand beside victims of hate or injustice, we might become a victim as well. This is what it means to be in solidarity with those who suffer, just as Jesus was crucified in solidarity with us.

Usually, though, the stakes will be much lower. For most of us laying down our lives will not mean physical death. But the principle is the same. Laying down our lives means laying aside our personal *claim* to our lives. Instead, we accept that our lives belong to God, and God commands us to put other people first. We do this by laying down our very human desire to live solely for ourselves – for our comfort and our survival. When we do this, we allow the Holy Spirit to teach us the way of servant love.

How many of you know the story of Ruby Bridges? Ruby was a young black girl living in New Orleans in the 1960s during the civil rights movement. For a whole year she went to a white school and sat alone in a classroom in order to integrate that school. Ruby was responding to the needs of her community. She sacrificed her comfort and security as an act of love and obedience to help create a better learning environment for her brothers and sisters.

“Little children, let’s not love with words or speech but with action and truth” (v. 18). Ruby knew that love is not just words – love takes our whole bodies. Jesus knew this, too.

The quantity and scale of suffering in our world can overwhelm and exhaust us. It’s easy to close the newspaper or change the channel when the scenes and sounds of other people’s pain become too much.

But if we say that we have the love of God inside us, then we cannot allow ourselves to become disconnected from the needs of other people. The discomfort we feel when confronted with another person’s suffering is a prompting from the Holy Spirit to pray and then act.

Yes, we cannot do everything, but neither God does not expect us to. Verse 17 is very clear: Whoever sees a brother or sister in need should act. Love attends to the need directly in front of us. This is where the Holy Spirit commands us to pay attention. God has put us in that person’s path for a reason.

But what about all the other needs we encounter? How do we keep our consciences at ease when we know we cannot respond to every kind of suffering?

In the remainder of our reading, the implied problem is the insecurity of devout Christians who do not feel adequate for the job of self-sacrificial love. We can all understand that feeling. Who here has seen their neighbor's need and wanted to help but did not feel capable? Laying down our lives is hard. Even 1 John's down-to-earth example of sharing our material possessions with the poor can trigger pangs of guilt as we struggle to find the right balance between providing for our own needs and caring for the needs of others.

God does not demand perfection. But God does demand obedience. 1 John tells us that the key to our peace of mind is our obedience to God's commandment. And that commandment is this: To "believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and love each other" (v. 23). To believe in Christ means to believe that he will save us by making us like him. First, we are justified by Christ's sacrifice. Then we are regenerated by his gift of new life. And finally, grace remains at work in our lives, transforming our selfish hearts into self-sacrificing hearts. This is the work of the Holy Spirit, who continually sanctifies and perfects us until the day of Christ.

The evidence of this sanctifying grace is found in our love for one another – incarnate love, whole-bodied love, love that takes on flesh in the world, expressed through acts of compassion and mercy and justice. When we love one another in this way, we become one with Christ. We abide in Christ and Christ abides in us.

How do we know that Christ abides in us? Because we have been given the Holy Spirit. And the Spirit is like an internal moral compass pointing us in the direction of love. The Spirit prompts us to obey God's commandment – to believe that we have been saved and are being saved in the name of Jesus, and to feel our love for others deepen through this act of salvation.

If we are listening to the promptings of the Holy Spirit and our lives show the evidence of love, then we can be assured that Christ is abiding in us. Even when we are filled with self-doubt or insecurity or feelings of inadequacy, these feelings will not condemn us because "God is greater than our hearts and knows all things" (v. 21). Christ-in-us allows us to stand confidently in the presence of God. We can boldly approach God's throne with our prayers and petitions. And the love of Christ that dwells inside us means that these prayers and petitions, just like our actions, flow not from selfishness but a self-sacrificed heart. 1 John says that if this is the case, God will hear our prayers and answer them.

As you come to the Lord's Table today, I invite you to bring your prayers and petitions with you. If Christ abides in you and you abide in Christ, then these prayers will be evidence of the love of Christ inside of you. As you receive the sacrament, trust that Jesus meets you at this table with what you need, so you may be fed and sent into the world to do the same for the next person you see.

Amen.