

# ***Hearts Opening***

*3 John 1: 1-8*

**First Presbyterian Church  
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Gerrit Scott Dawson**

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Last Thursday was Ascension Day. Did you have a party? There is reason to celebrate, cause for joy second only to Easter. Jesus has gone up. He has triumphed over death and sin. Now above us are blessing hands. The very sky above us is filled with his love. Our Savior has won. He is there, watching over us and even praying for us. Jesus has opened heaven to us. At Christmas we celebrate how God came to us and took to himself our flesh and blood. Now on Ascension Sunday, we rejoice that Jesus has taken that flesh and blood up to the throne of heaven. A resurrected man is at the right hand of the Father. He is preparing a place for us to live resurrected lives with him in glory. His preparations for receiving us include sending down his Holy Spirit right now to mold and shape us to be like him. He deepens our hearts so that we experience life now more vividly than before we knew him. We enter into hearts opening to love richer and more redemptive than we could have imagined.

Oh my dear ones, the story of the gospel, the journey of Jesus is so much deeper and higher than we usually realize. And that's a good thing. This story is not manageable. I can't reach the bottom of its depths or climb as high as its majesty. If I could, I would discard this story and so would you. We'd be bored. We'd be looking for something else. But if I ever get bored with the gospel, it only shows that I do not know the story. If I ever tire of thinking about Jesus, it only shows I have chosen an easy, shallow look at him over the glorious mystery that Scripture gives us. You remember how Spark Notes or Cliff's notes take all the imagination, excitement and power out of a novel so you can just learn the plot for a test? An easy gospel does the same thing. We trivialize Jesus to make him easy for people, never realizing how many people turn away from the church for being trite and superficial. Our souls crave the power of a story that is always more than we can master, which pulls us along out of ourselves to a higher world.

Over the last month we have been studying "Forgotten Gems of the New Testament." We've been looking at letters from the apostles which are lesser read than the more famous letters like Romans or Philipians. I've been struck by the insights we've gained into the personal relationships of the early Christians. We saw how passionately Paul loved the young men whom he made leaders in the first churches. He called Titus his true child in the faith. He felt the same way about

the runaway slave Philemon and his master Onesimus. He was not shy about expressing his affection. Indeed, we usually reserve such affectionate words for romantic relationships or those in our most intimate blood family. But these apostles who were so captivated by Christ saw their hearts open to depths of love that were as rare then as they are now. Yet, such love and affection between Christians is meant to be the normal experience of those who are made one in Christ. There is something in the gospel that is the cure for our deep loneliness. This morning let's take a look at three key ways love in Christ flourishes:

**1) Conversation and Prayer.** The apostle John writes to a church leader named Gaius. Listen for the love and affection in the opening verses:

The elder [John] to the beloved Gaius, whom I love in truth. Beloved, I pray that all may go well with you and that you may be in good health, as it goes well with your soul.

Do you normally write letters that begin that way? I don't either. And I think even in the first century such expression was rare. Three times in those few lines John uses the word "love." To the *beloved* Gaius, whom I *love* in truth, *Beloved*, I pray. John unashamedly and overflowingly writes of his affection for Gaius. And there's nothing creepy or sexual about it. This is an affection of the heart created by a mutual love for Jesus Christ. Jesus is the Love of God expressed in flesh and blood. Jesus is the lover of his bride, the church. We are his beloved. When we enter deeply into receiving Christ's love for us, we become united to all those who also relate to Jesus in such love.

This is love in truth. Jesus is the truth. He is the very truth of our lives, the realest reality. He created us. He saved us. He called us to himself. He is the reason for everything and gives our lives the deepest purpose. All of us who know Jesus have a story of how we have experienced that love. I was lost and now am found. I was blind but now I see. I was terrified and now I am at peace. I was sin-stained and guilt-ridden and now I'm clean and free. I was in despair and now I have hope. This transformation is the very deepest truth of my life.

When we share our personal story of how we know that we are the beloved of Jesus, then we get knit together in a mysterious, glorious bond of love. I need to repeat this because it's so important. When we speak to each other of how we have experienced the love of Jesus, we get knit to one another in that love. As long as we remain silent about sharing the truth of our lives in Christ, we remain blocked from each other. Little sharing means little affection.

Now we often intuit a love for Christ in another person. I can feel faith in people. We sit here in church next to glorious saints. We are together the bride of Christ. But we so seldom speak of this. We so seldom acknowledge what the Lord has done for us in a way that causes spirit to touch spirit. Once a year the newly elected elders and deacons of our church have to be examined by the current elders. This has become a time of rich faith sharing for us. We share in groups what the Lord means to us. And though we dread the evening, we always, I mean always, leave feeling joyful and refreshed that we have spoken of the Lord Jesus together. When you study the Bible with others, in a way that includes personal interaction with the Scriptures, you get knit to your fellow questers. Yes, it's terrifying for many of us to open up. But this is the way God made us: to know the mysterious, fulfilling love of Christian bonds in Christ, we have to have conversations about Jesus with one another. Then we have to speak our affection to each other.

We continue that conversation in prayer. John writes, "Beloved, I pray that all may go well with you and that you may be in good health, as it goes well with your soul." John tells Gaius that he is praying for him. And then he describes what he is praying. It's basic and beautiful. I pray that it may go well with you. That you would be in good health and have everything you need. But above all I pray that it is well with your soul. For I know sometimes we must suffer. I know sometimes there are downturns that don't turn up for a while. I pray that your suffering would be alleviated, of course. But in the meantime, while you wait for it to pass, I pray that your soul would grow strong and rich in love and grace.

Dear ones, pray for one another. Pray specifically. Pray more than in passing. Consider the life of the one for whom you pray. Pray for their souls to grow in Christ. Pray for their circumstances. Pray for their bodily health and their spiritual wellness. Both. Always both. Spirit and body. With specifics. Do it every day for a month and see how your love will grow.

**2) Love for the Children.** John writes this lovely line to Gaius, "I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth." I really hadn't been very aware of this verse until recently. But someone who is both a parent and a grandparent shared it with me. "I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth." If you have flesh and blood children, do you resonate with this verse? Would you want your child to make a million dollars a year yet do it through crooked means? Would you want your child to have every opportunity in life in this world, yet miss out on the one story that leads us to eternal life? Of course not. When you look in your heart of hearts, what more do you want for

your children and grandchildren than that they walk in the truth. For the truth is Jesus Christ and walking in him means being in a living, eternal relationship with him. If your children don't have that, your heart is pierced and your soul is burdened for them. If they have Christ, the rest of life's sufferings can be borne in hope and love. You might even want to tell them that. Tell them what would make you most proud, most joyful, that they walk in the truth.

But this is not just about flesh and blood children. John was not biologically the father of Gaius. But the bonds in Christ are so deep that John could feel as close as any parent to those he led to Christ Jesus. In fact, as disciples of Jesus, we are called to disciple others. It is to be expected as normal that there are those whom we feel are our children. We pray for them, rejoice in them, yearn after them and strive for them with astounding depths of love.

In our midst are some extraordinary Christians who would report just that. One night, Nancy Zito heard God speak in her soul, "Take care of my children." She accepted the Lord's call, but there was a problem. There are a billion children in the world. Which ones did God mean? She listened. She waited. She asked. One day driving through the Gardere neighborhood, she heard God speak again, "These are my children." And the message was clear, "Nancy, these are to be your children in Christ. These are the ones I've picked out for you to love." About sixty three children this year are coming under that love, and they are walking in the truth for the children at Gardere Community Christian School are coming to Christ.

Brian Sleeth prayed and prayed about God's direction for his life. He had served as a Presbyterian pastor for ten years, including planting a church. But he came back to Baton Rouge to take care of his father in his decline. When he died, Brian took care of his affairs, and then wondered: am I supposed to engage in business like he did? Or is there church ministry for me? That's when he got the call to be the director of our Christian Outreach Center. He manages the business of two vibrant thrift stores called the Purple Cow. Those businesses fund the ministry center downtown. Two years into it, you can tell: Brian considers the poor in our neighborhood to be his children. He goes to lead Bible Study at the One Stop center for the homeless and he knows them all by name and he knows their stories. He knows the residents coming out of the Alliance House for recovering addicts. He sees that they find work and get new skills for living clean. His heart swells for his children.

Dorothy Wallis wasn't always a fearless champion for the lives of the unborn. In fact, she was just the opposite. She used to give rides to women wanting to get to abortion clinics. When the Lord Jesus got hold of her, Dorothy's life changed, and she felt Christ's passion for the little ones in the wombs of desperate mothers. Now Caring to Love has helped more than 20,000 women make choices for life. Dorothy considers these moms, dads and their children to be her children. That's why care extends way beyond birth. She loves them as her own.

Those are just a few of the believers in our midst who have a passion as fierce as a parent for the people they disciple in Christ. It ripples out to the rest of us.

**3) Partnerships.** The last way we're looking at from John's letter involves how we grow in love as we join with others in their ministry. He writes to Gaius about some missionaries who had passed through. Gaius and his church helped to host these missionaries and then sent them off with provisions for their journey. John writes, "For they have gone out for the sake of the name... Therefore we ought to support people like these, that we may be fellow workers for the truth." Supporting those who go out with provision makes you a partner in the work they do.

I find this passage extremely comforting. And then challenging. Both the person who travels out and the person who provides for that mission are co-workers in the truth of the gospel. It's just as important to have people who send mission workers as it is to have mission workers who go. Considering my great fear of discomfort and scary unknown people, this is wonderful. I'm so glad we can partner with the Magraders for their mission in Kenya. I give to my church and therefore I participate in the \$50,000 per year we send in supporting them, and therefore I, and every other giving church member, are coworkers in the gospel. Awesome. All the work of this church belongs to all of the members. Each one of us is in on all of it. Stop by the Connection Center sometime and get a list of the Global and City Ministry partners we have. You'll rejoice in what your gifts actually do.

Of course the challenge is also here. The Lord calls us to participation. If it's giving, he doesn't mean left over change. He means true provisioning of his work. And if it's not going to the Middle East, starting a school or carrying the burden of an entire ministry, it still means involvement.

For the grand vision that came to Nancy Zito, there came co-worker status to her family, then ten teachers and literally hundreds of volunteers. We look around and see all kinds of co-workers. Dozens of church members working in children's ministry, rocking babies and teaching Bible stories, or working with youth or participating in our 30 local ministry partnerships. Not to mention all the other ways we enact gospel love in daily life and activities.

Now we don't talk about all the church is doing that often. My vision for the life of our church is that we gather to worship the Triune God of grace. The focus of worship is on Jesus. My deep belief is that when the church talks about Jesus in worship and study, its members will, without much prompting, start doing things for Jesus in the world. It is a profound joy to me to see that this is true. We focus on what John called the "Name." That is, the name that is above all names. We focus on Jesus whose name means "The LORD saves." We tell his story and proclaim his word. We hardly ever talk about money, but our giving increases. We don't over focus on service opportunities, but your participation grows. That means what we do comes from the very heart of us.

This very personal, passionate letter of John to Gaius has shown us how to increase our awareness of the mystical depths of the love that binds all Christians. We pray for one another and share stories. We participate together, by whatever way God calls us to serve, in our one mission of bringing the love of Christ to the world. And as we passionately care for those entrusted to us, we begin to feel as deeply as parents for children. Indeed we become beloved to one another in the truth of Christ. When you taste that, you realize with John, that there is no greater joy.