

*Love in Truth and Action*

1 John 3:16-24

April 28, 2024

Pastor Sarah Wiles

16 This is how we know love: Jesus laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for our siblings. 17 But if someone has material possessions and sees a sibling in need but refuses to help—how can the love of God dwell in a person like that?

18 Little children, let's not love with words or speech but with action and truth. 19 This is how we will know that we belong to the truth and reassure our hearts in God's presence. 20 Even if our hearts condemn us, God is greater than our hearts and knows all things. 21 Dear friends, if our hearts don't condemn us, we have confidence in relationship to God. 22 We receive whatever we ask from him because we keep his commandments and do what pleases him. 23 This is his commandment, that we believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and love each other as he commanded us. 24 Those who keep his commandments dwell in God and God dwells in them. This is how we know that he dwells in us, because of the Spirit he has given us.

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This is our third week with the letter of first John. The first two weeks were heady, abstract theology, but this week the rubber meets the road. "Jesus laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for our siblings." In case we're not sure what that means, they give us an example: "If someone has material possessions and sees a sibling in need but refuses to help—how can the love of God dwell in a person like that?" How's that for concrete.

It's not the first thing I think of when I think of what it means to lay down your life. I tend to think about martyrs, or a soldier laying down her life for a fellow soldier, or a teacher blocking the door in an emergency.

When I think about it more metaphorically in my own life, I think about putting someone else's needs first or letting someone else have their way. Which is good. But it's interesting that when these early followers of Jesus wanted to talk about love and laying down their lives, they talked about material possessions and need.

Money, poverty, wealth—these were spiritual issues for early Christians. Material concerns and the distribution of resources wasn't political philosophy. They were a matter of love.

It may not look like it on a shiny Sunday morning, but there are a wide range of economic situations in our congregation. Some of us are quite comfortable. Some of us

depend on the SSI check every month. Some of us have plenty of money to eat out whenever we want. Some of us sometimes put off buying groceries so that we can buy medication. Many of us, probably most of us, worry about money.

All of us have more than billions of people worldwide. I forget that. All of us have more than many of the immigrants and refugees who come to our country. All of us have more than at least some of our neighbors right here in the New River Valley.

These inequalities aren't disconnected from our faith. Our response is a question of love. Or, at least, that's what early Christians thought.

A couple of Sundays ago the youth led us in worship. Their passage was the second half of Matthew 25 where Jesus judges between the nations based on whether they cared for the hungry, thirsty, imprisoned, sick, and immigrant. When we got home my spouse Joseph said, "The youth are so radical. I love it. They were basically saying if you don't help people, God's going to judge you." I said, "Honey, that's not the youth. That's the Bible. They were just reading it."

If someone has material possessions and sees a sibling in need but refuses to help—how can the love of God dwell in a person like that?

But putting this into action is tricky. What's the best way to help someone in need? Christians have had different ideas about that. Some emphasize individual generosity. Others emphasize systematic redistribution of wealth. Our faith asks for both. The foundational laws of ancient Israel prevented the accumulation of wealth, redistributed it regularly, and insisted on care for the most vulnerable as the most important measure of a society. Jesus didn't critique this vision. If anything, he emphasized it. And he also would pause to heal just one person at a time.

We need both. Systemic change and redistribution without compassion and humanity quickly becomes brutal. Individual charity without systemic change perpetuates inequality.

I love how our congregation tries to hold both together. For just one small example, we volunteer and give to the local interfaith food pantry. We give our time, we give actual food, we give financially. We even give creatively, recently helping to set up and administer a fund for halal meat so that our neighbors who are Muslim can still have access to protein. We see neighbors in need, and we help.

But we don't stop there. You'll see in the bulletin we're also participating in an advocacy campaign around the Farm Bill. The Farm Bill is the most significant piece of congressional legislation concerning not just agriculture, but our national food system. It is the bill that provides the funding for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program,

or food stamps. It matters because federal nutrition programs provide roughly ten times as much food assistance as private churches and charities combined. And that's only the tip of the iceberg in terms of how just this one piece of legislation affects hunger for millions of people around the world. We'll learn more about that next week.

Both of these—providing food to the person right in front of you who is hungry and working to alleviate that hunger on a societal level—both of these are what it means to love with action and truth.

It's easy for this to devolve into a situation where we feel like we can't ever do enough. So, before we stop for today, I want us to notice one more thing. Right after these challenging verses, it immediately moves into what to do when our hearts condemn us.

I really like how *The Message*, a paraphrase of the Bible, handles this verse. It's a little different: "My dear children, let's not just talk about love; let's practice real love. This is the only way we'll know we're truly living. It's also the way to shut down debilitating self-criticism... For God is greater than our worried hearts..."

God is greater than our worried hearts, and the way to shut down debilitating self-criticism is practicing real love. The action can be the antidote to the anxiety.

Let us love not with words or speech, but with truth and action, and thereby dwell in the love of God.

- Sarah W. Wiles, 2024