

Love in Action

1 John 3:16-24 and John 1-:11-18

Preached FCCW April 22, 2018

In the immediate aftermath of World War II, London was a royal mess. Many buildings had been reduced to little more than piles of rubble. But the worst damage was not to structures but to families. Many children had become orphans, some of them starving in the streets.

Early one cold, foggy morning, an American soldier was returning to his barracks in London. As he rounded a corner in his jeep, he saw a little boy standing in front of a pastry store window. His nose was pressed against the glass as he watched the baker kneading the dough for a fresh batch of donuts. The soldier pulled the jeep over to the curb, got out and walked quietly over to the little boy and stood behind him. They both watched as the baker pulled out a fresh batch of donuts from the oven and meticulously placed the piping hot pastries onto the glass-enclosed counter. The boy was literally drooling. An unconscious groan escaped from deep within him.

The soldier's heart sank. He asked the orphan, "Son, would you like some of those?" His voice startled the boy, who thought he was alone. He looked at the soldier and replied, "Oh, you bet I would!" Without a word, the soldier stepped inside the bakery and purchased a dozen donuts. He returned to the boy with a bag in hand and simply said, "Here you are."

As the soldier started to walk away, he felt a tug on his uniform. He looked back at the child, holding the bag of donuts. The orphan boy asked, "Mister ... are you God?"

I don't know about you, but I don't ever expect to be confused with God by anything I do. You know who does get confused with God –at least in the Bible? Shepherds.

One of the most familiar and beloved passages in the Bible begins with, "The Lord is my shepherd." When Jesus wanted to let people know that God's love for them dwelt in him, he said, "I am the good shepherd."

But he didn't only express his love by what he *said* about *himself*. He also demonstrated God's love by what he *did* for *others*. "The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep," he declared. Then he backed up those words by going out and giving his life for us.

The first epistle of John, reminds us of Jesus' love-in-action where it says, "We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us." Then it challenges us to follow the example Jesus set. "Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action."

Love is known best not by what we say about it, but in how we live it. Love is not just a noun. It is also a verb. And love is known most fully in action.

In another part of this same epistle, John says that, "God is love." But it is through God's action of sending Jesus Christ into the world, and through Christ's action of laying down his life for us, that we know what "God is love" truly means.

The same test applies to our love. Is it something we talk about? Or is it something we act on?

John asks us a penetrating question. "How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help?"

"We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us," is only half the message. That verse continues, " – and we ought to lay down our lives for one another" Our response to the love of God that Jesus showed us is to reflect that love to others. Not to give love out of guilt or out of compulsion; but out of a grateful response to what we have been given.

A little girl got her first taste of staying in a nice hotel when she was on vacation with her parents. Maybe "nice" is an understatement. This was a five-star hotel. After exploring all the comforts and luxuries of the room, do you know what made the biggest impression on her? It was the discovery that the maid left a wrapped candy on each pillow! That unexpected personal touch was what made her feel most welcomed and special. Because it made her feel the way it did, the next time she and her parents helped out at the homeless shelter, this little girl spent her allowance to buy some candy,

which she carefully distributed to each bed at the shelter. First she was the recipient of a generous act, then, when given the opportunity, she passed it on. That is love in action!

At the heart of Christian faith lies an unexpected and undeserved gift. There are many religions that have something to say about God's love, but there is only one that says that this love became visible in the life and death of a human being who was the perfect reflection of God.

Love became visible as Jesus walked the village streets preaching good news to the poor; it was visible in the healing of lepers; visible in the casting out of demons; visible in feeding the hungry; visible in his acceptance of the outcast and the downtrodden. It was visible because it wasn't something Jesus just talked about, it was something he acted out.

This visibility reached its climax in the most vivid manner – when the champion of the poor,
...the friend of sinners,
...the giver of life,
...laid down his life for us.

The gift of God's love given to us is visible in the actions Jesus took and in the sacrifice that Jesus made on our behalf. To be Christian is to orient our entire being around receiving this gift. We have received what we never deserved, so we are called to give to others, without calculating whether or not they deserve it.

Our call as the Church – the Body of Christ – is to be a living metaphor of that love of God that was revealed to us by Jesus – not only in the things he said and taught – but in the ways he actively cared for people.

Our gifts of time, talent and financial resources enable ministries in our congregation to care for those who wonder if they can ever feel like God loves them. Who doubt that anyone notices or cares about their needs. Who despair that there is anyone to help them out of mess their lives have become.

Our lesson this morning encourages us to examine our own lives, and our commitment to our faith communities, and to attend to the gap between the *love we profess* and the *love we share*.

Telling people about our experience of God's love is a good beginning. But it is still *our* experience they're hearing. The next step is to help them experience God's love in *their own* lives. How will we commit ourselves to love, not just in word and speech, but in truth and action?

The barometer with which to gauge how God's love abides in us starts with measuring how well the gospel we *preach* is reflected in the gospel we *live*.

God showed us love through Christ's offering of his life. Occasionally, his followers have demonstrated that same depth of love and sacrifice. One of those was Archbishop Oscar Romero, who was a champion of the poor and a prophet of peace and justice in El Salvador.

This Shepherd of God's people was fatally shot on March 24, 1980, while saying mass. His assassination was a direct consequence of his fearless advocacy for the poorest of his flock. And it came after he had just finished preaching about the need to give one's life for others as Christ did.

Though most of us may never be asked to literally lay down our lives for others, our faith still calls us to offer ourselves as a sign of Christ's love, to measure our priorities, to take a stand, and to express our beliefs through action.

You and I may never be confused with God. But what we do just might be the one thing that removes some lost soul's doubts about whether or not God loves *them*.

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