

Sermon – “In Truth and Action”  
Sunday, July 9, 2017  
Scripture Readings: 1 John 3:11-17, 1 John 3:16-24  
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Our first reading is from First John, chapter 3, verses 11 through 17. Hear these words calling us to our purpose in Christ.

*<sup>11</sup> For this is the message you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another. <sup>12</sup> We must not be like Cain who was from the evil one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his own deeds were evil and his brother's righteous. <sup>13</sup> Do not be astonished, brothers and sisters, that the world hates you. <sup>14</sup> We know that we have passed from death to life because we love one another. Whoever does not love abides in death. <sup>15</sup> All who hate a brother or sister are murderers, and you know that murderers do not have eternal life abiding in them. <sup>16</sup> We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. <sup>17</sup> 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?*

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Our second reading continues the words we just heard, speaking of the love of Jesus for us and our love for one another. Listen for the Word of God to you in First John, chapter 3, verses 16 through 24.

*<sup>16</sup> We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. <sup>17</sup> 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?*

*<sup>18</sup> Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action. <sup>19</sup> And by this we will know that we are from the truth and will reassure our hearts before him <sup>20</sup> whenever our hearts condemn us; for God is greater than our hearts, and [God] knows everything. <sup>21</sup> Beloved, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have boldness before God; <sup>22</sup> and we receive from [God] whatever we ask, because we obey [God's] commandments and do what pleases [God].*

*<sup>23</sup> And this is [God's] commandment, that we should believe in the name of [God's] Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us. <sup>24</sup> All who obey his commandments abide in him, and he abides in them. And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit that he has given us.*

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You may have noticed all the folks in these black t-shirts. A week ago (or a year ago, I'm not sure which) this bold group of travelers all set out on a journey to Fentress County, Tennessee, for this year's youth mission trip. Home repair was the stated goal- and these youth and their adult leaders did a lot of that. But something much more than that was happening this week.

The motto of the organization with whom we were working with, the Appalachia Service Project, or "ASP", is "Warmer, safer, drier." They want to eliminate substandard housing conditions among people in the region who can't afford to improve their own inadequate and often unsafe homes. But ASP also calls themselves a relational ministry that does home repairs on the side. We saw this week why they say that.

Westminster Presbyterian Church supplied five work crews. I was pleased and honored to see members of this congregation putting forth diligent efforts, embracing difficult and uncomfortable work, putting their experience to work and eagerly learning and trying brand new tasks. Every one of those crews found that the work to which they applied themselves was important to the homeowners, making a real, material difference to their lives...but was, even so, of secondary importance when compared with the homeowners themselves. We were there to accomplish tasks, but the action of doing tasks wasn't the purpose in and of itself; the love of *people* was the point.

It is strange to think that real relationships with strangers could form in just one week. But spend a week in someone's home, sharing and hearing stories, playing with children, and being trusted in the intimate space of someone's hardships and needs, and you find a human bond of caring and connection. Was the highlight of the week the satisfaction of seeing a completed wheelchair ramp that will meet a need? Or was it seeing the face of the child in the same house light up with excitement when he received the gift of a matchbox car to race down that ramp?

All week, we were reminded of the Bible verse which provided our mission trip's theme of "Love in Action," 1 John 3:18: "Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action." We are given a model of love by Christ: "We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us."

In other words, we can sit here and talk about love all day, but love isn't just talk; it is something more. We went on this trip to try our hand at it. We also went to learn something about what it is, and I think we did.

Love is when you can't afford to insulate your house against the cold, but you still pull from your limited budget to buy pizza for a whole group of strangers who came from Illinois to help make your home warmer.

Mission is a lot of things: work, joy, fun, fellowship. We hope to leave something behind that lasts, and we hope to take something back with us that lasts as well. It isn't just fun memories that we mean to keep, although there were plenty of those (I'm *pretty* sure there aren't still any deflated air mattresses hidden in the ceiling at the Allardt Elementary School). It is more than this, a spirit of awareness and of willingness, a lesson in generosity and human relationship, and an exercise that grows our practice of love.

It reorients us, if we let it, as we work. It reorients us, if we reflect upon what we are doing and conscientiously hold to what we learn from time spent in this way. I think one of the fundamental ways it can shift our thinking is in how we approach the question of purpose.

As people of faith, we understand that purpose comes from God. And always, but especially at certain moments in life- when we are graduating, changing life circumstances, or reevaluating the circumstances we are in today- we wonder: if God has a plan and a purpose, then what does God have for me? What does God intend for my life?

That's a very good question, and God's promise is that the answer, whatever it may be, is full of blessing. But I sometimes wonder if we are mostly thinking about it the wrong way around. Is it possible that we're asking the question backwards? Maybe our question, most of the time, shouldn't be, "What does God have *for me* in life?" but "What does God have *me for* in life?"

That little shift in wording is a subtle but important shift in thinking about meaning. It is important because God did not create us passive recipients of blessing, but as a higher level of beings, ones who share with God in bringing blessing upon one another, who create good things and receive them at one another's hands. "What does God have for me?" is a self-oriented question. "What does God have me for?" is a question that orients us toward love in action.

Christ wished for us to love one another. He wished for us to love one another as he loved us, in fact, which was a giving love, a sacrificial love.

That sounds beautiful, but vague, too. What does that mean for you, specifically? I'm going to bring in another verse, a word God spoke to the prophet Jeremiah: "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you."

I brought up with the mission trip participants the other day the notion of being gifts to the world from God. We sometimes hear someone described as thinking he is "God's gift to women," or some such, which is of course not a compliment; it means that person is way too full of self-confidence and too full of himself. But that aside, here is something I think scripture tells us is actually true:

Every one of us is, in fact, God's gift to everyone around us. God made us to love one another, and put us in one another's lives as a gift.

I want us to think about that. I'd like us to do something a little unusual in the middle of a sermon. We're going to do a little exercise that we did the other day while on the trip. In a moment, I'm going to ask you to turn to a person next to you. I'd like every one of you to take about one minute to share one thing in yourself that you can recognize as a gift to those who encounter you in the world.

This can be hard! We can be reluctant to think this way, but remember: this isn't about bragging or being proud. We are often proud of what is in our personal nature, but that's just an impulse that distracts us away from reflecting on our purpose and toward admiring our reflections in a mirror. It is, in fact, rather ridiculous for us to be prideful about the traits that God put in us, because, well, however constant the temptation may be, it looks foolish for us to act as though *we* are responsible for *God's* having created us who we are.

That is, we are not taking *credit* for what is in us; we are *naming* what is in us, and naming what we have within us with which to love people is a part of loving in truth, and is necessary for us to love people in action in the specific ways that *we*, as individuals, are made to love people. So go ahead, share, briefly, with your neighbor, one little piece of the answer to this question: What do you have, in who you are, in how you were made, body, mind, and spirit, that can be a gift?

*[break for conversation]*

Thank you for sharing. I invite you to continue to think about this. You are created as a blessing. I hope you will investigate exactly what sort of blessing that is meant to be, and seek to live it out in truth and action.

May God continue to work in all of us, growing our commitment to love, deepening our understanding of love, and filling our lives with love. Amen.