

Date: April 25, 2021

Scripture: I John 3:16-24

Title: LOVE

We all know that there are certain physical characteristics that are totally unique to each individual, like your fingerprints. They're entirely unique, no one else has fingerprints exactly like yours. The pattern of your iris, the colored part of your eye, is totally unique. So is your DNA. But, did you know that your heartbeat is completely unique too? Every person on earth has a different heartbeat pattern, or "cardiac signature." Your cardiac signature can't be altered or disguised. So, if someone can measure your "cardiac signature," they can identify you, even in a big crowd.

In fact, the Pentagon has built a laser, that can identify people by their heartbeat, from 600 feet away. Now, there are positive uses for this technology, like Doctors monitoring your heart health, from far away. This laser could also be used to track criminals, or terrorists, from long distances. Did you ever imagine, your heartbeat, your cardiac signature, could be so distinctive? Now, let's apply that to our faith,

We don't need a laser, or any advanced technology, to tell us what a Christian's "cardiac signature" looks like. Our scripture lesson for this morning, from 1st John 3: 16-24 makes that clear. The heartbeat of the Christian, is to love others, with the sacrificial love of Jesus. It's Not a warm, fuzzy feeling. It's Not good intentions or encouraging words. But it is, loving actions. Actions that cost us something. As verse 18 reads, ". . . let us not love with words, or speech, but with actions, and in truth." Talk is cheap, the writer of this passage is saying. Real love is costly.

Our scripture lesson for today, was written to encourage church people, to be more loving toward one another, especially those in need. If we can't do that, John tells us, we've missed the very heart, of the faith, that Christ gave us.

Al Lingren, a professor at Garrett Theological Seminary, had a conversation with his teenage son. Lingren's son asked his dad, "Dad, what is the toughest thing God ever tried to do?" Now, they teach you a lot of things in seminary. But, they don't exactly cover this question. Lingren wracked his brain for an answer, then asked his son, "What do *you* think it was?"

The boy said, "Since taking science in school, I thought the creation of the world might be the hardest thing God ever tried to do. Then in Sunday school, we got to talking about some of the miracles, and I thought the resurrection might be the toughest thing God ever tried to do. But, after thinking about it some more, I decided, that the toughest thing God ever had to do, is to get us to understand who God is, and that God loves us."

I think that young man was onto something. As he reflected, ". . . The toughest thing God ever had to do, is to get us to understand who God is, and that God loves us."

How did God get us to understand who God is? Well first, through the Law and the prophets. Then, through coming to us in the flesh, in the person of Jesus Christ. So then, how did God get us to understand that God loves us? By giving God's Son, to die on the cross, and rise again, to save us, from the penalty of sin and death.

John, the disciple of Jesus, who wrote these verses, knew, that if he didn't make it perfectly clear, what Christian love looks like, we would try to define it for ourselves. He doesn't give us that option. In verse 16, he writes, "This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we, ought to lay down our lives, for our brothers and sisters."

The essence of Christian faith is love. Listen to some selected words from this chapter: "Behold, what manner of love the Father has bestowed upon us, that we should be called the children of God . . . For this is the message that you heard from the beginning, that we should love one another . . . This is how we know that God loves us, because God laid down God's life for us: and we ought to lay down our lives for one another . . . Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action."

Friends, that's the Gospel: ". . . children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action." Unfortunately, it's not always easy to love! We tend to withhold love until someone passes our "approval test." We love those, who we think are deserving of our love, which is exactly the opposite of Jesus' love. Jesus didn't love us, because we were easy to love, or we deserved it. Jesus loves us, with the very love of God.

Just as Christ laid down his life for us, so we too, ought to lay down our lives for others. That means loving all people, even those who misuse us, and that means doing good to all people, even those whom we may not approve of, and that means, leaving our comfort zone, from time to time, for acts of extraordinary concern. The essence of Christian faith is love.

This brings us to something else, that's important for us to realize. **Love is our primary witness to the world.** How will the world know we're Christians? By our love. If the day comes, when the Christian church, is as loving as its Master, the world will beat a path to our door. John asks, "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 to help?" The answer is, it doesn't.

Frances Havergal was an English poet, pianist and hymn writer in the mid-1800s. Her most famous hymn is probably, "Take my life and let it be," which begins with the words, "Take my life and let it be consecrated, Lord, to Thee." In each verse, Havergal offers some part of her life for the Lord's service. Take my voice, take my hands, take my feet, take my love. She asks God to use every part of her life to make a difference for others.

The fourth verse of this hymn begins, "Take my silver and my gold, not a mite would I withhold." And Frances Havergal really meant it. In her journal, she wrote of

packing up a jeweled cabinet that belonged to her family, along with some other ornamental pieces, worth a great deal of money, and sending them off to the Church Missionary Society, to be used funding missionaries, in other countries. She noted in her journal that day, “I don’t think I need tell you, I never packed a box with such pleasure.”

How do we know that Frances Havergal had a heart like Jesus? Because she willingly and joyfully, gave away her most expensive treasures, for the sake of sharing the message of Jesus, with strangers in another part of the world. She saw brothers and sisters in need, and she was determined to help them. Love, is our primary witness, of our faith in Christ.

Many years ago, Pastor W.A. Criswell told of visiting a Wycliffe missionary camp in a remote district in Peru. He watched, a small amphibious plane come out of the Peruvian jungle, and land on a nearby airstrip. Two young women came off the plane. They were covered in insect bites, that had become infected, and turned into open sores. Their condition looked miserable. But the young women didn’t complain.

They were missionaries, and they had chosen to serve in a remote part of Peru, sharing the message of Jesus, with the native community, who were violently opposed to outsiders. If the Wycliffe organization, had sent men, to preach, and teach, to these people, they would have been killed. So these young women, volunteered to serve there. And every so often, when they got too sick, from the insect bites, they would return to camp, for a couple of weeks, for medical attention. Then, they would head right back into the jungle. They gave up their comfort, and their safety, for the joy of sharing the love of Jesus with others. A few months after the young women began their ministry there, the leader of this indigenous people, gave his life to Christ.

Love is more than just an emotion or a feeling. Love is feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting the sick and imprisoned. Love is not a passive verb, but an active one. It’s the primary way we share Christ, with the world.

Love is our primary witness to the world. As the saying goes, “People don’t care how much we know, until they know how much we care.” But there’s one more thing that we need to see.

Love is a gift from God. There’s a bumper sticker that reads: “Perform an unnatural act, love somebody.” It’s true! Pure love is not, an attribute of humanity, but of God. Our nature, is to strive for survival, to strive for our own well-being. God’s nature is self-giving love. The closer we are to God, the better able we are to love others. John writes, “And by this, we know that God abides in us, by the Spirit, God has given us.” That Spirit is love.

There’s an old episode of the TV show “The Twilight Zone” in which a gambler dies. He wakes up in a room full of gaming tables. And no matter what game he plays, he wins. A gambler’s dream comes true! This must be heaven!

But as the gambler goes from table to table, winning every game easily, he comes to realize that he didn't wind up in heaven at all, but in hell. You see, he had everything he ever wanted, but he didn't have anyone to share his winnings with.

Love, is a gift, God gives us. It's multiplied and magnified, when we can give it away, when we can love others, with the same sacrificial love, that God showed to us.

In the face of persecution, injustice, torture and humiliation, Jesus faced his death with courage and grace, even forgiving the men who hung him on the cross. Jesus willingly, suffered his awful fate, to show us how far God would go, to prove God's love for us.

The words John wrote centuries ago, are still true for us today! They are, "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 God commanded us." When the love of God truly abides in our heart, we are able to look into the faces of others, and see God's face.

Love is the essence of Christian faith. Love is our primary witness to the world. Love is a gift from God. We love, because God first loved us. Only as we abide in God, can God's love abide in us. Let us abide in God and live with God's love Trusting, Believing, and having an Active Faith in God making disciples of Jesus Christ in the transformation of the world. Amen.