

Sermon – April 25, 2021

So, if you haven't picked up on it yet this Sunday, in the season of Easter, is referred to as the Good Shepherd Sunday. Our two first scripture lessons are common to us. We often hear them in the context of a funeral, because they give to us words of comfort of who God is in relationship to us. Jesus claiming that identity as the eternal care giver, of the Good Shepherd of God's sheep. An image that those in that time would've heard and understood as one who was willing to risk it all, including life itself, for the safety of the flock, the followers. That intimate relationship is one that brings us comfort as we realize that the Good Shepherd isn't just one who guides us here on earth, but one who invites us to become a part of the eternal sheep fold where God is.

But John in his letter to the church, as it's beginning, takes it a step further. You see, the writer of 1 John is the same writer who wrote the Gospel of John. He's writing a letter to a brand-new entity because the church didn't exist before Jesus resurrection. It became Christ's body as the disciples sought to live out Christ's command to bring the Gospel, the Good News of salvation, of God's eternal covenant, to all of God's people worldwide. They began to organize believers to be equipped to be sent; that was what the church's role was and is today as well. We gather in worship not to get something from God, but to be inspired and equipped by God to go out to do God's work. That is what John is calling attention to in his letter. “We know love by this, that he lay down his life for us and we ought to lay down our lives for one another.” Action. He keeps it going. “Little children let us love not in word or speech, but in truth and action.”

Last week as we talked about the concept of justice we realized it was so big it was often hard to define. So, we tried to narrow it down into a scope that we felt manageable. We were encouraged to do just things. Do things that would be just in the world for all. This week I think John pushes us that next step, to remember that love isn't just a sentimental emotional feeling that we have within us, but it is the call to action. It is a verb. We do love, we don't just feel it.

Jesus was the primary example of what it meant to put love into action. All of Jesus' ministry reached out in God's love to even, and especially, the most marginalized in the world. He touched lepers, outcasts, literally, from the community, sent outside the community's bounds, and Jesus touched them. He brought healing of sight to the blind, those who were believed to have the consequence of sin, and he touched them. He ate with those who were considered to be the least among them. He was even willing to take the service role of the lowest of the lowest slave, the most humble, by laying down his cloak and taking up a towel to wash the feet of the disciples at the Last Supper. Jesus put his love in action in very real ways. Ultimately, willingly, of his own accord, giving up his very life on earth in love for us. Taking up new life in the resurrection, living in a different way; that's the call the church is given, to live in a different way, to love in a different way. Just as Jesus lay down his life, we are called to lay down our lives. We hear that and we think that that means it's only something we can do once, giving up our breathing, our existence on earth. But I think it goes beyond that. I think what John is challenging the church, then, and us, to do is to give up the comfort of life as we know it for the benefit of those around us.

When we think of life it's a duality. Life is the breath, the existence that we have in the world, but our lives are based on the way in which we live. The things that we have, the interactions that we have, the way that we go about being who we are in our world, that is life. That is the life that we should be willing to give up for another. But how do we do that? How do we put this concept of love that is so great into action? By not just doing just things but by being willing to give up of ourselves.

On Friday I had a young woman visit me in my office. She was walking by. She had seen the church several times and was curious as to who Moravians were. We had a wonderful conversation, not just about who we are as Moravians, but what it means to be a believer. How it means to live that life out. As I walked her out of the church and finished this conversation with her, she asked a question that has challenged me ever since. She asked it in the context of Jesus asking Jesus' people, “Why won't my people let me in my house at night?” Hearing that question, I realized the intent behind the question is, “why do we lock our doors to prevent people from finding a safe place to be?” There are so many among us who are living in poverty, who are denied basic human rights, who are struggling to live at a regular livable place. How can we, the church, live out love to them?

It has stirred my spirit and I still am processing and praying and seeking what God is calling me to do

from that simple question. Because I realized as I listened to that question that I haven't been living this out. The question that he 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?" As I go about my life I see others in the community who don't have what I have, who are struggling to meet some basic needs. Yet I come back to my warm home, my clothes that I can wear, the food that I have at my table. Living out love isn't just saying that we believe in God, that we believe God loves one another, it means actually putting that into action.

When John challenges the church saying, "Let us love not in words or speech but in truth and action." If we were to put that in more modern terms I think what John would be saying is, "why aren't you putting your money where your mouth is?" When he says money I'm not talking just about our finances. "Why aren't you putting into action that which you say you believe? Why aren't you doing those things that you know you could be doing to help those who cannot help themselves at this time?" It almost feels condemning; to realize that we live in a society that promotes individualism to the point where it says to keep everything that you can, 'Get everything that you can. Don't let anybody have any, and try to have more than the other person.' In that kind of world, it's hard to live out *this* kind of love. The kind of love that Jesus is calling us to, asking us to give of ourselves for the other. Yet we know from the Psalm, from the Gospel and from this that we're going to be OK, because God also provides for us. God grants us God's spirit when we seek to obey God's will. It's a matter of trust. Do we honestly trust that when we say that Jesus will be with us even through the valley of the shadow of death, even in the greatest, deepest, darkness of our lives God will be there? Are we willing to trust that? Are we willing to be that the way that God is there for someone going through that challenge?

That is the challenge of the church. To trust that if we are willing to give up part of our lives, part of what we have for someone else, that God will make sure we're OK. It's the challenge of being a believer. We'd like to think that all we need to do is say we believe and accept Jesus Christ and then everything's good, we can just sit back and relax. But over and over and over again through the scriptures we're told that when we claim that faith, when we believe what we believe, that we should be putting it into action. That the love that we say we have for our Savior should be evident in the things that we do and the way that we live. John reassures us, "All who obey his commandments [to love] abide in him and he abides in them. By this [that loving and abiding with one another] we know that he abides in us and also by the Spirit that he has given us."

When I was asked that question by that young lady I felt the Spirit urging me, challenging me, provoking me; as I still do. But I know that if I am attentive to that Spirit, if I'm willing to be open to God's guidance, it will show me how to put the truth of God's love and provision into action, so that the boundaries are open for all to experience that. It's what Jesus meant when he said in the Gospel lesson, "There are others who are not part of this flock, they will come also." A broadening of all into God's provision.

I invite you to join me this week as I seek, and encourage us all to seek, to spend time being mindful, intentional about being open to what the Spirit is urging us to do as God's followers. What would our church, our community, our country and our world be like if we stepped out in faith, putting what we claim to believe into truth and action through the Spirit's guidance and strength? How can we live the gift of giving up in love?

Let us pray. Holy Lord and God, sometimes the greatest challenge of following you is actually doing what you ask us to do. Help us, Lord God, to be open to hear your Spirit's movement. Give us the courage and strength we need to take a step in action, to not just feel love, but to do acts of love, showing your love to our world. Help us to be faithful as we seek to abide in you as you abide in us, for we pray this in and through Jesus, the great shepherd, our leader, our guide, amen.