

3 Easter 2022
May 1st
CCM

Let us pray. May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of our hearts, be always acceptable in this sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

There is a legend told about the author of the fourth Gospel.

John the evangelist apparently lived quite a long life, and towards the end of his days, grew so frail that he had to be carried by his friends to the meetings of his fellow Christians. There, he was always asked to give the sermon, but because of his weakness, he was no longer able to speak at length, and so he would simply say to all gathered, "Little children, love one another." Apparently, after repeating this same message over and over and over again, some of his disciples became concerned. So they came to him and asked him why he now never said anything else.

According to the legend, John looked each of them in the eye and said:

"DO THIS ALONE AND IT IS ENOUGH."

As my time with you draws to a close, I want to say both simply and emphatically that, if there is one word that can sum up the entire meaning of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, that word must be LOVE. As the theologian William Barclay once wrote:

In the Gospels, love is the basis of everything. God loves Jesus; Jesus loves God; God loves God's people, God's people are shown how to live according to that love through Jesus; Heaven and earth, the people and God, the people to one another, all bound together by the bond of love.

Fine. That sounds good. I think that all of us here this morning would agree that love is a good thing.

The only problem is, I don't now how many of us in this day and age really have a full understanding of what love actually is! I know that I struggle with this every day of my life, and that there are far too many moments when I have wandered far away from God's definition of love as fulfilled in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. Let me try and explain what I mean:

Like some of you today, I am a product of the latter half of the twentieth century. To be specific, I am a child of the sixties, seventies, and eighties. And my initial understanding of love was shaped by that culture. We watched "Love, American Style" and "Love Boat." I read "Love Story," the punchline of which was, "Love is never having to say you're sorry." We listened to music that encouraged us, "to love the one you're with," and I don't think Crosby, Stills, and Nash had Jesus in mind. And we perused magazines that equated love primarily with good looks, fashion, and attracting partners for romantic relationships. Frankly, it all became a little murky, to the point that Joni Mitchell quite rightly lamented:

“I’ve looked at love from both sides now, from give and take and still somehow, It’s love’s illusions that I recall... I really don’t know love at all.”

Here is what I have come to believe. Over the course of the decades, we have substituted God’s definition of LOVE for one of our own. We have tried to redefine love in terms of feelings and romance and self-actualization, which sadly, often seems to lead to self-indulgence and at times outright selfishness. Furthermore, love has become passive. It has more to do with “what can I get out of the relationship” rather than “what can I give to this person in order to make her/his life better?” Like so much of us else in our culture, we have become consumers, in that, if we don’t get what we want out of the relationship, if our dreams and aspirations aren’t being fulfilled, then we drop them and go shopping for someone else. And by the way, we have done the same in our feelings about God, friends, and even the Church. If they don’t give us what we want, well then, we move on, looking for someone or something “better.” We have become consumers through and through!

Is this really the love that Jesus came to proclaim? Is God’s love passive? Does God move on because we have hurt God’s feelings or when God grows bored with us?

No. The first thing we must realize is that God’s love is ACTIVE, not passive. Throughout the collection of books we have come to call the Bible...through Adam and Eve...through Abraham and Sarah...through the major and minor prophets, and most particularly in Jesus Christ, God’s love comes to us. Both this morning’s reading from the Book of Acts and this passage from John’s Gospel, the last of the post-resurrection stories in John, define for us the proactive nature of Divine love. Saul, the archenemy of the earliest Christian communities becomes the chief Apostle to all the gentile world. Peter, the lead Apostle, who denies his his beloved Rabbi three times in the most dire moments of his Rabbi’s life, finds himself in the most intimate conversation with the risen Jesus, who asks him three times does he still love him, and then invites him to feed and tend this nascent flock of believers. This, my friends, is the infinite love of God in action.

Although we have given God many opportunities to do otherwise, God never gives up on us. Every sunrise is a reminder that God has blessed us once again, and that God will be here with us through all the joys and sorrows of the coming day. Likewise, every sunset is a reminder that God has been there and that God’s love will be never ending. It is this understanding of love that must become our own as best as is humanly possible. We are to love God with all of our hearts and our minds and our souls, with all that we are and all that we have, each and every moment of our lives, not just when it suits us or is convenient.

How do we do this? By loving our neighbors as ourselves...for God’s sake. By respecting the dignity of every human being, not just the ones we happen to like. And by understanding that love is not based on what we might get from another, but rather, by what we might give to another so that they too will know that power of God’s love revealed in Jesus is active in their lives as well. Forget the warm fuzzies. Instead be active and DO unto others what you would hope others would do for you when you are in need. (The concert in support of Ukraine at Grace the Plains is an example of God’s definition of love in action.)

Which brings me to my final point this morning. There is no getting around it. To love according to God’s definition requires sacrifice, something we are not very enthusiastic about in our present moment. We’re not too keen about giving to others if it means we might make ourselves somewhat less comfortable. After all, our time, talents, and all the other resources that we might

make use of, well they are all scarce commodities these days and we're supposed to hold onto them as best we can, aren't we?

It is a good thing for us this morning that that was not Jesus' understanding as he knelt in the Garden of Gethsemane...or as he stood before Pontius Pilate...or as he was nailed to the cross. Jesus once said that, if we truly wanted to make him the love of our lives, then we must be prepared to pick up our own crosses and follow him. That means sacrifice. After all, Jesus came to define God's love for us, and in doing so, he gave his very life. If we really want to understand what God's love is about, then we must prepare action, and yes, it will require real sacrifice on our part. Like Paul and Peter, it may even cost us our very lives.

Love one another. Love one another. Love one another.

Do this alone and it is enough.

Amen.