

Truth and Action

April 25, 2021

1st John 3: 16-24

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

¹⁸ Little children let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action. ¹⁹ And by this we will know that we are from the truth and will reassure our hearts before him ²⁰ whenever our hearts condemn us; for God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything. ²¹ Beloved, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have boldness before God; ²² and we receive from him whatever we ask, because we obey his commandments and do what pleases him. ²³ And this is his commandment, that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us.

²⁴ 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.

John 10: 11-18

¹¹ "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. ¹² The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away — and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. ¹³ The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. ¹⁴ I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, ¹⁵ just as the Father knows me and I know the Father.

And I lay down my life for the sheep. ¹⁶ I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So, there will be one flock, one shepherd. ¹⁷ For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. ¹⁸ No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father."

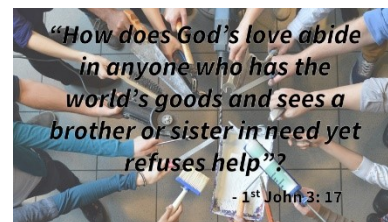


What is the heart of the Christian faith? Many people today would answer that question by listing some doctrinal beliefs – Jesus died to save us from our sins

and to give us eternal life... God created the world... We are God's beloved children... Love your neighbor as yourself... Do not murder, steal, commit adultery... In theory, living these and other core beliefs of the faith would transform the way one sees the world. But, as we have learned the last two weeks, seeing is not believing. When one examines the teachings of Jesus and the apostles that followed him, another message emerges: Christianity is about *doing* far more than *believing*. As we delve into "Truth and Action" today, let us begin with a word of prayer...

As we begin, join me in 1st John 3. Our first passage this morning begins with a reminder and a call to action. It is also an answer to this question: "*We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us — and we ought to lay down our lives for one another*". John reminds the early church that Jesus died for each of them. This remains true today. John then turns from example to follower – we should be willing to do the same. We should lay down our lives for others.

John gets down to brass tacks as he explains the depth of the commitment that he is talking about in today's passage. In verse seventeen John says, *"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?"* Sit with that question for a few seconds...



There once was a group of guys who were returning from playing golf in rural Georgia. As they drove down a two-lane road they came up on a smoldering house. It was obvious it had burned during the night. Standing in front of the smoldering ashes was a distraught woman with a small child. The men were Christians, so they stopped the car and asked if she was okay. She said nobody was hurt but she had lost all she had. The men each pulled a few dollars out of their pockets and handed it to the woman and said, "God bless you."

They drove off in silence. After a couple of miles, the driver stopped the car and took off his golf hat. He turned to his buddies and said, "Okay, take out your wallets and give me all the money you have. We're going to go back and give it to her." They emptied their wallets and one man even wrote a large check. The amount in the hat totaled over \$1,000.

When they returned, they found the woman standing in the same place. The driver got out and said to the woman, "We just gave you some money, but we made a mistake. Would you be willing to give me all that money back?"

The woman looked at him as if he was crazy, but without complaining she gave him the few dollars they had given her. The driver then added that money to that inside his hat and handed her the whole hat. Then he said, "We'll be sending you more."

Would you stop and help? Would I stop and help? Surely you and I would see her standing by the side of the road, house smoldering in front of her. Would we see a sister in need and refuse to help? Or would we stop?

John continues in verse eighteen, saying, *"Little children let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action"*. John is getting at the crux of the Christian faith.



To see someone in need and to say, "I'll pray for you" or to say, "God bless you", and to then walk or drive away without giving any tangible help is loving in word and speech. To hand a single woman with small child standing in front of the smoldering ruins of her former home and to hand her a few dollars and then to say "God bless you" as you continue on your way is to love in word or speech. To turn the car around and to give her all you have and to promise to send more, that is loving in truth and action. The driver of that car listened to his heart condemning him, as we read in verse twenty. He simply could not keep driving. The Holy Spirit was tugging on his heart. Have you ever felt that? Have you ever passed someone by or refused to help and then felt the Spirit going to work on you? Have you ever driven by someone asking for food only to turn back around to bring that person some food?

John goes on to speak of the blessings of God that come when we are faithful. In verses 21 and 22 we read, *"Beloved, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have boldness before God; and we receive from him whatever we ask, because we obey his commandments and do what pleases him"*. When we are bold in our faith, obeying the voice of the Spirit, living in truth and action, then our hearts will not condemn us. When we are living that kind of faith, being bold and seeking to do God's will in our world, then we will pray bold prayers. We will pray Spirit-led prayers. When we pray for ways to love our neighbors, when we pray for ways to heal our broken world, when we pray to be used by God to bring wholeness and healing to another – then we will receive from God both these blessings and his presence. He will abide in us and we will know his love.

As Easter people, we are called to be incarnations of Christ Jesus in the world. We are called to be his hands and feet. Teresa of Avila, a Carmelite nun who lived during the early 1500s, famously said, *"Christ has no body on earth but ours"*. This sentiment was lived out by the early church. They cared deeply for one another and for those in need around them. Two weeks ago, we studied a passage from Acts 2, where the followers sold homes and land to have money to care for those in need. They were willing to make sacrifices for one another. They were following the example set by Jesus. They were willing to allow the gospel to transform them. They did not simply say they believed in Jesus and then prayed for the needs of the world around them. This kind of faith would have fallen far short of the faith that Jesus himself embodied and taught. I am forced to ask myself: what kind of faith am I living out?



Turn with me to John 10, our second passage for today.

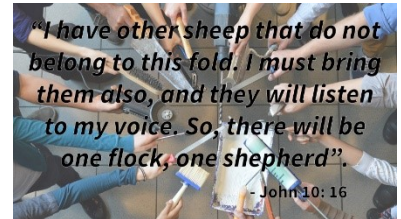
In this passage we hear Jesus explaining what it means to lay down one's life for another. This too was John's call in his epistle letter that we read earlier: *"we ought*



to lay down our lives for one another". In John 10, Jesus identifies himself as the "good shepherd". He compares the good shepherd, the one who will *"lay down his life for the sheep"*, with the hired hand – the one who will run away when he sees the wolf coming. Understandably, the hired hand does not care for the sheep; he is not invested in or committed to the sheep. But Jesus, the good shepherd, he is invested, he is committed; he knows the sheep and the sheep know him, just as God knows Jesus and Jesus knows God. We are, of course, the sheep in this parable. Jesus knows us and we know Jesus. In verse fifteen Jesus says, *"And I lay down my life for the sheep"*. Jesus is referring to going to the cross for us, for you and for me. In verse eighteen Jesus adds, *"No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord"*. Willingly, humbly, obediently, sacrificially, Jesus laid down his life for each of us.

How this contrasts with the ways of the world! *A young man wrote this to his girlfriend: "Sweetheart, if this world was as hot as the Sahara Desert, I would crawl on my knees through the burning sand to come to you. If the world would be like the Atlantic Ocean, I would swim through shark infested waters to come to you. I would fight the fiercest dragon to be by your side. I will see you on Thursday if it does not rain."* If it does not rain on Thursday. If I am not too busy. If it will not require too much of my time. If the cost is not too great.

Turning to verse sixteen we hear the call to the other – to the least and the lost, to the broken and the marginalized, to the outcast and the lonely. In verse sixteen Jesus blows open the mission field. In this verse Jesus says, *"I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So, there will be one flock, one shepherd"*. Today there are sheep outside the fold. Today there are people who do not know Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior. All people are beloved creations of God almighty, maker of heaven and earth. Jesus longs to bring all people into the family of God, to be the one good shepherd of all people. This longing is based upon and founded in the agape love of God – the unconditional and equalizing love of God.



Unless we are willing to live in truth and action, unless we are willing to make our faith in the way of Jesus real by living the sacrificial life that Jesus taught and modeled, then how can we say that we have God's love abiding in us? It is far easier and all too common to simply believe in Jesus and to pray for God to meet people's needs. Unless we are willing to sacrifice self, our comforts, our privilege for the good of the other, then we truly have not understood Jesus. It is far easier and all too common to toss in a few dollars than it is to go back and give all that you have and to promise to send even more. If we are not compelled to follow in the ways of Jesus because of the overwhelming and unconditional love and grace that God offers, then maybe we have not experienced the world-shattering love of God ourselves.

It is far easier and all too common to say we love Jesus than it is to allow his love to transform us into that love.



A woman told of the time her professor in nursing school gave a pop quiz. She said, "I was a conscientious student and had breezed through the questions, until I read the last one: 'What is the first name of the woman who cleans the school?'"

She thought: "Surely this was some kind of joke. I had seen the cleaning woman several times. She was tall, dark haired and in her 50s, but how would I know her name? I handed in my paper, leaving the last question blank."

Before class ended, one student asked if the last question would count toward our quiz grade. "Oh absolutely," said the professor. "In your careers you will meet many people. All are significant. They deserve your attention and care, EVEN if all you can do is smile and say hello."

She later said, "I've never forgotten that lesson... and I also learned that her name was Dorothy."

As I close, I return to the question we began with: What is the heart of the Christian faith? *"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?"*



Little children let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action". To love in truth and action is to pause and become present to the one standing before us. To love in truth and action is to stop and to meet the need that God has placed before us. To love in truth and action is to empty ourselves and then to promise to return with more.



That last question counted on the quiz. My brothers and sisters in Christ, we too will meet many people. Fellow followers of the good shepherd, all people are significant in his eyes. My travelers on this shared journey of faith, each and every person deserves our attention and care, even if all we can do is smile and say hello. Often, we can do more. As we seek to live in the truth of God's agape love – his unconditional and equalizing love – and as we seek to be Christ's body in action, may we too know their names.

The good shepherd laid down his life for us. We each have the power to "*lay down our lives*". We have the power to offer our lives in sacrificial service to the other. We have the power to enter another's story, to bear another's burden, to relieve another's suffering, to bring another closer to Jesus. We too can lay down our lives. May we so love the world and the one in need that in and through us they experience the life-changing, transforming, saving love of God found in Jesus Christ. May it be so for you and for me. Amen and amen.

GPS – Grow, Pray, Serve

- 1) *Grow*. How have the times that you have experienced the “overwhelming and unconditional love” of God shaped your faith? How do you share this?
- 2) *Pray*. Who is the other in your world right now? How can you empty yourself for them? Pray for the strength and courage to do so.
- 3) *Study*. Read John 10: 22-30 and reflect on these words in light of our passage from John 10. Jesus says of us: “*No one will snatch them out of my hand*”. What does this mean to you and for your faith?