

## Knowing Love, Doing Service

Menno Mennonite Church

April 25, 2021

**Purpose:** To explore the roots of service and ethics within Christian faith.

**Message:** As recipients and people of God's love, we put that to action in the form of living that love out.

**Scripture:** 1 John 3:16-24 (I will read), Complementary: Acts 4:5-12, Psalm 23, John 10:11-18

**Synopsis:** This is possibly one of the most idealized versus of the bible, with one of the most overused, yet ill-comprehended ideals of the scripture. We hear these words and think of the grandiose stories of those who went to exotic places and sacrificed all for the sake of following Christ. We, most of us in any case, are not there—this is simply not where we are called to be. We may even resent the presumption of this text, feeling like it puts a guilt trip more than anything else on us. We may have seen it mis-used and abused over time. But the call to about the work of walking with each other remains. How do we balance this call with a healthy understanding of how we can serve without fully, and resentfully, dying to self.

<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 he 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 him whatever we ask, because we obey his commandments and do what pleases him.

<sup>23</sup> 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.

<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. (1Jo 3:16-24 NRS)

evernote:///view/31369896/s249/cd289bbe-b2da-4ac2-8af0-1087d7fe9b01/2c0e829c-0ff5-4023-bfa0-a4ebb1ad1a14

<https://www.ucc.org/sermon-seeds/love-is-a-verb/>

## **1 John 3:16-24**

<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 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.

There are times at which words fail us. Not those “I don’t know what to say,” or “words escape me for what this—thing—is called”. The failings of the basics of conversation. What I mean here is that there are times where there is a disconnect between the word we use for something and the sum total of what we might mean by that word. Case in point: Love. How is it, I wonder, with all of the effort and creativity that we put into the concept and idealization of love and all its accompanying implications and we are still unable to differentiate the passion we feel for our own flesh and blood, as in ‘I love my children’, the love of a spouse, and the desire that we feel for the most common things in our lives as in ‘Man, I love tacos.’ Like the Eskimo needing the infinite vocabulary to describe the many states and varieties of snow, we are left with the simple heading of love when we are trying to explain the guiding force within our lives, personally, spiritually, and beyond. We pepper the concept into all of life, replacing it with emoji’s or the selfy hand shape when that won’t do.

Most of the time, I am not sure whether we really know quite what we mean by it all specifically, spare with a reasonably healthy footnote explaining things of what we mean by that. One of the things that makes new romantic love so powerful is this interplay of figuring out what we mean by the things we say. Fun fact: if you ask Emily and I when precisely we got engaged you may receive 2 answers months apart based on differing interpretations of a conversation. Not that matters, really—it all works out in the end—but it is one of those things where interpretation makes a bit of difference.

This work of interpretation is at work within the church as well. As our passage this morning shows, there is an ongoing negotiation of how best to love each other that starts pretty much from day one. The expectations of how we do the work of being the little Christs that we are called to be is always one fraught with all sorts of difficulties and negotiations along the way. But in this pastoral letter, the author makes it pretty clear: “We know that love is this; Jesus laid down his life for us, and we should lay down our lives for others?” Through the centuries we have applied this in abstract to the most extreme cases of fully dying for the other. Which can make this all seem a bit remote and out of touch. Even within a tradition that loves a good bloody martyr story as much as next guy, it seems a little bit out there. We hear this and we instantly conjure up images of Dirk Willems going back to save the drowning man on the ice, or Mother Teresa ministering to the poor. Good stuff to be sure, but we don’t place ourselves into these images; we don’t think that this is anyone we know. This is the stuff for the spiritual

superheroes, given to feats of power and might. But not for us mere mortals who might not quite there.

But that doesn't mean that we don't read these lines to mean that we really should be doing exactly that. We receive the challenge in one of two ways: either we insist that we should take on the sacrifices and comprehensive faith of Christ in all things, forsaking all else, or we reason that since we are not actually the son of God, and not given his task or his talents, aren't going to get anywhere close to this so why even bother? This is a basic but effectively comprehensive summary of two common implementations of Christian ethics that has raged on for centuries. Mennonites, being given to the inclination of supposing that this level of love is real and relevant for the faithful life, want to engage this concept, but we can struggle to know how to do it well, and wonder at times whether we have or can ever do enough to live to this lofty standard (a personal affliction of mine).

Being torn between disregarding putting realistic meaning to our deeds or the guilt of perhaps missing the boat is not a good recipe for happy living or fruitful faith. So how do we work with this in a realistic way that can engage the challenge with meaningful impact without necessarily needing to seek the worst of the worst, at least on purpose?

Let's start here: what does it mean to lay down one's life? As we have applied this text in the abstract every time that we needed to reach for language to explain the inexplicable reality that there are times when some people sacrifice that others may live, there is more breadth to this wording here. Yet, the Greek would render the notion of laying down as something not necessarily permanent. The word includes the meaning of setting aside, placing down, and the rest, not only the implication of a full and final mortal endeavor. As our lives have become increasingly complex and run by OUR schedule and OUR timing. Having our schedules upended can be some of the most frustrating and imposing circumstances of life, but also one of the most serendipitous. Because it is the opportunity to meet something or someone that we may not have any way or any other time. I will go on the record that one of the things I like most about the work that I do is the opportunity to have my day interrupted by the sacred opportunity to simply talk and be part of other's lives, something on the long list of things to retrieve from the woes of the pandemic. Laying down our preferred life, our planned life, our intended life to encounter the other is a must.

Because love, no matter what the flavor, must always be made real. As fond as we are of cultural cliché of declaring that all we need to do is just love each other and everything will come out alright, we also know that few of us mean fully what we might say on our bumper stickers. Without some definition and explanation translating idealism to actuality, it means little more than just the professions of admiration that we have for our favorite jeans. Real love, no matter what the variety, requires flesh and bone to be defined, action to back up the word and give it meaning. Without incarnation-- the word remains just that—a flat expression without depth or meaning having limited application. Love is an incarnated thing and must be made real indeed and in truth to have definition as something real, living and relevant. This is the example of Christ to be sure, and it is in his mold that we are to function, even if we are not likely to achieve to the same level. Jesus came to embody God to us. That embodiment, and the faithful representation of all that God is led him to the Cross, and through the cross to the resurrection. We seek to follow that same way in showing God's love around us and through us as well. That is what is meant here by incarnating love.

So what does this mean really for us. There are multitudes of ways to love, many of which you practice already. I have heard some of them already—I teach partially because it is a way to live my faith. My farm and the work we do helps give food to the hungry. I reach out with compassion and consideration because I want to show love. I help behind the scenes to get people what they need because I can. The list goes on and on. Most of this I am guessing you do not undertake as a particularly pious act. Instead, it is just what you do, who you are and that is enough. And for the most part that is more than alright. Perhaps, though, the challenge is to make the connection from what comes naturally and rightly to the faith and love the underlies the impulse. There is power in articulating that I do what I do because it is how I wish to show love both in coming to that realization for ourselves or even being willing to say to someone else: I want to be who I am because it is who I am called to be in Christ, and in that confession begin a conversation.

But maybe it is something even more simple than that. Maybe it is a willingness to hold your to do list a bit more loosely. Perhaps it is laying down your life—setting aside the ways and means and priorities that we each carry for ourselves and our allotted time and allow ourselves to be directed into the distractions that may feel inconvenient, unwelcome, unplanned, and

unproductive, and offer them up to God and to name them for what they are: opportunities to show and know love along the way.

We are not called to be superheroes, always seeking to sacrifice our self in the name of piety or passion. There is no righteousness in constant fear of failure, or self-loathing of our inability to achieve the perfect service of the other, the ideal ethical lifestyle, or the blameless life. We are called to the two basic commandments of the life of the kingdom—have faith and show love. The two go hand in hand, because it is God’s essential nature to love the other, and love fully, sacrificially, and fully.

This week, I invite you to consider the ways that you love. I invite you to consider the motivations of your ways of serving. If you come to serve as an expression the love of God as a way of mindfully laying aside your life for the sake of others, I commend you to hold on to that, nurture that, grow in that. But if we are serving simply out of strict routine or a sense of guilty obligation, I think some re-evaluation may be needed. For whatever we do, whenever we do it, must come from our inmost self, the place where God lives and breathes and sustains us in ways we can barely conceive of, and we can’t live without. Because we have to know love—God’s love deeply, fully, comprehensively-- and be rooted in that before we can serve with freedom, hope and promise.

Let us lay down our lives in love, not in expectation, obligation, but with the expectation and hope that we are showing God’s love even as we learn to know it in ourselves. May we always love well, and in that love point always to God. Amen.