

## Let not your Hearts be Troubled

1 John 3:11-24 2/14/09

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I don't believe in CO-incidences. I believe in God-incidences. Last Monday, as I was just starting to think about this week's sermon our daily devotion at breakfast was based on Isaiah 58:6-7, "<sup>6</sup> Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? <sup>7</sup> Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter— when you see the naked, to clothe him, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood? Our devotional is called, "Seize the day with Dietrich Bonhoeffer." It has a quote from one of Bonhoeffer's writings. That day's quote from Life Together reads, "...

It was no co-incidence.

It is no co-incidence that many in the congregation had a wonderful time Friday night at the Fabulous, February, Fun Fellowship. The theme was, "Here I am Lord. Send me." We focused on service and the many and varied forms mission and service takes.

And it is no co-incidence that today we had a 'Minute for Mission' focusing on our Jr. High's mission to Haines to work on the Presbyterian Church there and on our Sr. High's Mission to Galveston, TX to work on hurricane relief.

The first letter of John makes clear *that our job as Christians is to love one another*. We see this love in what Jesus did for us, when he laid down his life for us, and we act on this knowledge when we "lay down our lives for one another" (1 John 3:16). The sacrificial love of Jesus is more than a nice idea and a noble concept — it is, in fact, a pattern of behavior that is supposed to be displayed by us in action. John asks, "How can the love of God be in anyone who has material possessions and sees his brother or sister in need but has no pity on them?"

The short answer is: It doesn't. God's love lives in those who see a need, and respond with help.

Eugene Peterson captured the concreteness of this everyday love and compassionate assistance when he wrote *The Message*. His version of v. 18 is, "My dear children, let's not just TALK about love; let's PRACTICE real love. This is the only way we'll know we're living truly, living in God's reality."

Making it real. Putting it into practice. Taking action. That's what John is talking about when he challenges us to love one another.

So why is it so hard for us to focus on this job?

- Most of us find it easier to argue with our political opponents than to love them.
- Most of us are more comfortable taking a stand on abortion than taking care of a woman with a problem pregnancy.
- Most of us would rather write a check to a homeless shelter than spend an evening providing job counseling to a person on the streets.
- Most of us find it so much simpler to define our religious duty in terms of attending church

and making offerings, rather than doing the complicated and challenging work of feeding the hungry, welcoming strangers, clothing the naked, caring for the sick, visiting the imprisoned and spreading the gospel.

Somehow it's easier to put our energy into arguing about politics, abortion, homelessness and our current culture. These topics give us the comfort of a black- and-white view of the world, one in which there are good guys and bad guys, angels and demons, winners and losers. But Jesus was never about crushing his opponents — instead, he challenged us by saying, “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven” (Matthew 5:44-45). If we are going to take our job seriously, we are going to have to take the difficult path of putting love into action and making it real. It is much harder to love one another than it is to fight one another.

The key to rising to this challenge is to realize that love comes from God, not from human beings. John tells us that we know love because Jesus laid down his life for us. Love means readiness to do anything for other people. It means saying ‘No’ to one’s own life so that somebody else may live.

Several years ago I took a Spiritual Gifts inventory. You may have taken one before. I’ve taken many over the last 25 years or so. On this particular inventory I scored highest in a category I’d not thought about previously. Actually, I don’t think of it as a spiritual gift but it was on the inventory. The category was Martyrdom. It was my highest score! I went back through the questions to see where the score came from. I realized the questions did not ask about the things one might endure in the process of martyrdom. So, yes, I was willing to give my life for the Lord, but I was NOT interested in suffering for the Lord.

Last year I met a young man who had stopped attending church with his family. We had a great conversation about how much he loved Jesus. He read his bible daily and could quote scripture much better than I. Toward the end of the chat I asked him, “Young man, would you give anything to show you love Jesus?” He said, “Yes Ma’am, anything.” Really, anything? “Yes Ma’am, I’d give my life for Jesus!” So, I asked him, “Will you get up early on Sunday morning to worship Him?” It’s one thing to say how much we love Jesus. It is truth to put that love into action.

John says, “This then is how we know that we belong to the truth, and how we set our hearts at rest in his presence whenever our hearts condemn us. This what? This, Action. ACTION is how we know that we belong to the truth. And ACTION is how we set our hearts at rest in his presence whenever our hearts condemn us.

Anybody else here have a heart that tries to condemn them? I know mine does. There are times I’m filled with self-doubt. There are times I think to myself, Lois Beth...yes, it IS my mother’s voice I hear when I’m angry with myself...Lois Beth, how could you DO that, you know it was wrong. Lois Beth, you’ve been talking about doing xyz and it’s still not done. Lois Beth, you’re not doing enough for God! Yet here we have John’s reassurance, “For God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything.” It reminds me of the scripture from the Gospel of John, Chapter 14... where Jesus comforts his disciples saying, “Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God ; trust also in me.”

It seems to me that when we put our love into action our hearts CAN rest in God’s presence.

If we succeed in loving one another, the credit actually belongs to God. Not to us. Any love we show is a sign and a signal that God's love is working through us.

In a sense, this lets us off the hook. We can say to critics, "Hey, don't blame us — blame God!" We're not required to figure out precise and perfect positions on all the tough issues of the day, as long as we love one another. John doesn't say that we will be blessed by God once we achieve a political victory or articulate a flawless moral position. No, he says that we will receive from God whatever we ask "because we obey his commandments and do what pleases him" (v. 22).

*This is His commandment:* to believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and to love one another as he commanded us.

Our world is in desperate need of a church that puts love into action and makes it real. There are people all around us who are searching desperately for a community that actually practices what it preaches. Over 100 years ago, the Christian philosopher Søren Kierkegaard made the point that Jesus was looking for followers, not admirers — he wanted people who would walk with him, do his work, and serve in his name.

One of Kierkegaard's own parables told of a man who was walking down a city street when he saw a big sign in a window that said, "Pants pressed here." Delighted to see the sign, he went home and gathered up all of his wrinkled laundry. He carried it into the shop and put it on the counter.

"What are you doing?" the shopkeeper demanded.

"I brought my clothes here to be pressed," said the man, "just like your sign said."

"Oh, you've got it all wrong," the owner said. "We don't actually do that here. We're in the business of making signs." We don't do these things, he was saying. We just talk about them.

And that, said Søren Kierkegaard, is often the problem in the church. We advertise ourselves as a place that is showing Christ's love and doing Christ's work. But when people show up looking for real love and real Christian action, they don't see it. "Oh, no, we don't love people here. We just talk about loving people here."

As believers in the name of God's Son Jesus we are to do what Jesus wants us to do. This means helping a brother or sister in need, and loving one another in truth and in action. It means focusing on activities that really show the love of God to people who might be feeling quite unloved and unlovable. We members of the body of Christ need to reconnect with the valuable gifts that we can offer the world around us.

If we are going to advertise God's love, let's actually practice God's love. It's time to return to the job we have as Christians: to believe in Jesus Christ and to love one another.

And we CAN do it. As John assures us, "Those who obey his commands live in him, and he in them. And this is how we know that he lives in us: We know it by the Spirit he gave us.

Let us pray. Generous and loving God, You are holy and just. Yet, we live in an un-holy and un-just world. And so, this world is aching, yearning, waiting for us to take action. Lord, we here your command. Help us rise to the challenge. Help us to take action that we might live in the truth of your example by the power of the Spirit you have given us. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.