

“Let us Love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action”

1 John 3: 16-24

This should be one of those texts that the minister should just be able to read and then ask if there are any questions before the minister sits down again. John does a really good job of explaining just exactly what we are called to do as people of God. He lays it all out, no ifs, ands or buts.

But regardless of how John has simplified our calling as people of faith, why does it seem so hard to live it out in our daily lives? He sums up our calling with one question: “If you see some brother or sister in need and have the means to do something about it but turn a cold shoulder and do nothing, what happens to God’s love? It disappears. And you made it disappear.”

Seems easy enough but for some reason, this knowledge doesn’t always translate to our everyday lives. I will admit I’m guilty of not always following John’s advice in my own life and on my own faith journey. There have been times when I have seen someone on the side of the road with a sign that reads “Homeless” or “Can’t find work” and I have driven by or checked to see if the doors to my car were locked. And I know that I am not alone in my actions and in my guilt. In passing conversations, many of you have asked me about the times when you have found yourself in similar situations and had the same reaction.

Does this make us bad people? Does this make us bad Christians? I guess if we were going by John's reasoning then, yes, as uncomfortable as that makes us feel. I guess we could say that through this passage, John would tell us that we missed out on showing God's love to others but I don't think John would want us to say in this place because he goes on to say in his letter that God is greater than us and that God's grace is bigger than our guilt. I think John would also tell us that if we only focused on these types of moments then we were only listening to part of his message. And I also think John would say that he is calling us to look beyond those moments when fear overtakes us and our very human side comes out to the larger picture at hand because he would be the first to admit that these moments happen to everyone. That's why there is such a thing as grace.

I think in reality when John asks us this question, he is asking us to focus our attention on just exactly who are our brother and sister? If we notice in the text, John is very specific in his language when he poses this question. He doesn't use the word neighbor. He doesn't use the word stranger. He uses the words brother or sister, indicating that this person is someone who we interact with every day, that this person is a part of our community of faith, that this person is a part of the worshipping community.

I think when John poses this question to his community all those years ago, he is really wanting them to take a good look at how they interacted with each

other. He wanted them to think about how they could sit and talk about God's love in worship, then leave church, and act like they didn't know each other or behave like God's love was for Sundays only but not required the rest of the week?

Basically John was asking his community why anyone would believe that God is love when God's own people weren't being very loving toward each other because at the time when John was writing his letter, he was writing to a community that was in danger of allowing its disagreements to destroy its unity. He could see that their actions were fracturing the Body of Christ and he was wanting them to realize the harmful impressions that they were giving off to the wider community.

Now, let me stop right here and say that I struggled to find a connection between John's community and our very own community of faith this week especially since over the past month or so, there have been so many ways that our community has shown love and support for one another.

But I think this text goes beyond our Midway community to bring a word to the larger Church itself. It really is a word for us as Christians, as disciples of Christ, as ones who are called to make God's love visible in a world that is broken and in need of some good news.

So for us to truly listen to John's word for us as disciples, we need to be honest with ourselves. We need to realize that we live in a world where most people nowadays will say that they are spiritual but not religious and when asked

why is that, they will respond, “Have you seen how church folk treat each other? Why would we want to be a part of that?”

We’ve all heard stories that describe how hurtful places churches can be. Just a few months ago, there was a story about how church membership was denied to a couple because they were interracial, even though the wife had grown up in that church. Or most recently, there have been stories circulating about how some bishops are trying to quiet nuns who they feel have spoken out too loudly against the wider Catholic Church policies. And these are to name just a few. I’m sure we can all come up with examples of how, like John said, church folks have made the love of God disappear because of their hurtful interactions with one another or because of the lack of love shown for one another. And so when I hear comments like, “I’m spiritual but not religious”, I think who can blame them?! Because to be honest sometimes, when I look at the Body of Christ here on earth, I have often wondered if the decline of the wider church wasn’t our own doing in the first place because we have not lived up to our calling to make God’s love visible. As the wider church, when it comes to loving our neighbors and the stranger, that is easy to live out in our faith lives. Maybe it is because our interactions with the stranger happen only once. Maybe it is because we give and then we still can hold onto the illusion that we are in control. but for some reason when it comes to showing love to our brothers and sisters who we interact with weekly, we

Christians find that hard to do and sometimes to the outside world, it does seem like we are making God's love disappear.

And as someone who has grown up in the church and has seen and experienced the love of several communities of faith, this breaks my heart even more. It breaks my heart when I hear that people are leaving the church because it is seen as judgmental and exclusive. It breaks my heart because when I hear stories about how church people, the very people who talk about the love of God, don't necessarily treat each other with God's love, I find myself being like John, who just wants to say to the Body of Christ, why would anyone believe that God is love when we can't be loving toward one another, especially when I have experienced just what true community, love and support can be in the church when the people of God truly do embrace their calling to make God's love visible to one and all, neighbors and well as brothers and sisters in Christ.

And once again, I know that I am not alone in this sentiment. Ever since we started this Surfing the Edge process, I have heard many of you share conversations that you have had with co-workers, neighbors, friends, and family who have given up on the wider Church in general. And in response to the conversations, all we have wanted to say is "But you haven't been to my church. It truly is loving and welcoming." And I hear the frustrations in your voices when

that sincere invitation is brushed off with a cynical “Yeah right” or a nonchalant “Um hum”.

But I’m going to say maybe our real response to these conversations should be “I’m sorry” because in truth, when we have heard the stories about how the Body of Christ is not treating each other in a loving manner, we Christians have not stood up to say this is not how Jesus taught us to behave. We as Disciples of Christ have not stood up to say, like John, Jesus calls us to live in God’s reality, a reality where love is made real, where peace abounds, and where grace flows down that water, washing everything new.

As disciples of Christ, we know and hold to the knowledge that grace has been shown to us by God and that we are called to show grace to one another as brothers and sisters in Christ, living in community with one another, supporting one another, loving one another, and embracing each other as made in the image of God.

Because at the heart of the matter, as disciples of Christ, as followers of Jesus who came and showed us how to love one another as God love, we are called to love not just in word or in speech but in truth and in action and that truth and action means grace, grace for ourselves and for one another.

As Christians, as disciples of Christ, we are called to make God’s love visible in this world so that when the outside world sees us, worshipping together,

fellowshipping together, breaking bread with one another, serving together, proclaiming the Kingdom of God together, and yes even agreeing to disagree with one in love, they will see the presence of God made real. They will see God's love made visible. And they will believe that Yes, God is love, no ifs, ands or buts.

They will know that the love of God is real. They will know that the grace of God is real. They will know that God is real and that God is still working in our world, bringing healing and hope, bring reconciliation and wholeness, bring peace and unity to the Body of Christ and to all of God's creation now and forevermore.

May the world know that God's love is real because we as Disciples of Christ love not just in word or in speech but also in truth and in action. Amen.