

**First Presbyterian Church**  
**1 John 3:16-24, “We know by the Spirit”**  
**by Pastor Matt Johnson, 4/25/2021**

We need to love each other. On this we are all agreed.

Even your annoying neighbor agrees.

Even the dictator shouting threats agrees.

Everyone agrees that love is good and we need it.

So why don't we see the evidence of love's power if we all agree its good and we need it?

Maybe the problem is that there's not enough love to go around.

Suzanne Sommers wondered that in her 1970s poem:

**Sometimes I wonder if there's enough love to go around.**

All the people I know grasp for it,

All the ladies whose husbands drift away

The men whose lives have forgotten to care.

The children standing on their heads to be noticed.

And, well, I might as well admit it, me.

**What about me?**

Sometimes I wonder if there's enough love to go around

With all the pain and longing

But one thing is sure

If anyone has any extra love

Even a heartbeat or a touch or two

**I wish they wouldn't waste it on dogs.**

Hmm...well said Suzanne. Well said.

But on second thought, I don't think not having enough love is the problem.

In John's letter in the Bible he proposes a different issue:

Love that isn't acted on.

The problem isn't a lack of love, but a lack of action.

Here's how he puts it in the second most famous John 3:16 of the Bible,

1 John 3:26:

**“This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us.”**

How do we know love?

The example of Jesus in laying down his life.

Jesus did not simply have certain feelings about people.

He wasn't just caught up in the thrill of  
being in the presence of people whom he loved.

Rather, Jesus acted on his love in that he "Laid down his life."

The opposite of laying something down is holding onto it.

How many of you know what it is to hold onto your life?

When a person lives to control their own time and resources,

lives to create protective boundaries, lives to ensure they get  
everything they expect, they are holding onto their life.

We all know what that's like – that's normal!

Nobody is going to take something from me.

Nothing off script is allowed, for this life, this body, this time,  
these resources belong to me.

That's holding onto your life, and it can result in the appearance of great success.

But that's not the life of Jesus. Jesus laid down his life for others.

For Jesus love was an orientation of life and action  
that was expressed every day in *what he did*.

The whole of Jesus life was laid down for us,

was a demonstration of what love is – not just a part of it.

Jesus healed, Jesus welcomed, Jesus gave honor, Jesus went out of his way,

Jesus laughed, and Jesus cried, and in all these things Jesus was  
laying down his life.

And in the midst of laying down his life for us,

the greatest thing that Jesus did, the greatest act of love he entered into,  
was to submit to death on a cross he did not deserve.

What does this lead us into?

First, it leads us into laying down our lives as well, as John says next:

**"And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters."**

We need to see how Jesus laid his life down prior to the cross  
because that's the primary way in which we also lay down our lives.  
We are called to live with regard to the cross in every moment,  
and this is life full of love.

The in v. 17 John gives us an extremely practical example  
of what love looks like in real life: Helping those in need  
**“If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in  
need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in that  
person?”**

This is not something I need to lean heavily on,  
because I see this impulse in the life of our church very strongly.  
From Community Dinner and Wednesday Breakfast,  
to our amazing Deacons,  
to our Mission Committee and all they do,  
to those of us going to plant trees with the Greater Yamhill Watershed Council  
this afternoon, to the normal lives of our congregation members,  
we express our walk with God in many concrete ways  
towards people in need, and it's wonderful.

The point that John is making about living in this way  
is that genuine love is something  
deeply connected to the life we live.  
Therefore a person who doesn't live with regard to other's needs  
doesn't have genuine love in them.

In the same way, doing the right things in order to try and fix someone's problem  
can often be done without love.  
So I don't think this is somehow a situation where you can say,  
“Well, I volunteer for something once a month, so I'm a very loving  
person even if nobody's ever grateful for what I do!”

And so John says in v. 18,  
**“let us love not with words or speech but with actions and in truth.”**

Now the next section of verses from 19 to 24 does get a bit more difficult  
to understand. Essentially, John moves from the question,  
“How do we know love?” to “How do we know the truth?”

And his answer, to simplify things greatly,  
is to say that truth is found when we rest in the presence of God.

He says that if our hearts condemn us  
(that is, if we feel we've come up short in loving our neighbors)  
then we can know that God is greater than our own hearts.

Our sense of inadequacy, in other words, shouldn't be read as a mirror for how  
God thinks about us – God's grace is greater than what we feel in our hearts!

On the other hand, if we are in God's presence and our hearts do not condemn us,  
then we can live with confidence, and we will receive anything we ask.

Anything? Well, yeah – remember the part about sharing material possessions?  
If we live as a generous community, then anything that is genuinely needed  
can be provided by God through the church.

John's logic is that if we have genuine love that results in action,  
then we can also have genuine confidence that we will never go without.  
This is the same logic of Safe Families for Children –  
if we show our love to our neighbors in need,  
then the children of our community can have anything  
they need to have a safe and nurturing childhood.

The final "How do we know?" comes in v. 24,  
**"And this is how we know that he lives in us:  
We know it by the Spirit he gave us."**

The witness of the Holy Spirit gives us confidence that God is with us  
as we live out our love within the church, in our neighborhoods,  
and in the created world.

The Spirit guides, leads and empowers the church  
in the absence of Jesus' physical presence.

We sometimes think about sensing the Holy Spirit as being a feeling we have,  
or a time of intense emotional uplift during worship or prayer,  
and that can certainly be one way for the Spirit to be manifested.

But I want to share a more practical opportunity to recognize that God is with us and to demonstrate our love through actions:

Two weeks ago, I had a Zoom call with three nurses from Willamette Valley Medical Center – our own hospital here in McMinnville – and a staff person for the Oregon Nurses Association.

They came to me to ask for support and help from our church.

They need help because a couple years ago the hospital was sold and became one of only two for-profit hospitals in all of Oregon.

Since that time, things have gone very badly for the nurses.

And if you've ever been in a hospital you know that if things are bad for nurses, that means things are bad for patients, too.

It's been so bad that 38% of the bedside nurses at the hospital have left in the past year.

They specifically called me because the hospital has recently fired their half-time chaplain, which means patients don't get spiritual support unless they use their one visit per day on a pastor instead of a family member.

So they're having a rally on Tuesday, 4/26 outside the hospital from 6:00-8:00PM, and I'm going to speak about the importance of spiritual care in healing.

I hope you will consider joining me – and if you come, think about it as a display of your love for the nurses who work so hard in our hospital.

These are the people who take care of you when you get hurt, and they have asked for our help, our support, our love!

If you can come or not on Tuesday, the point is, *this* is the kind of practical display of love that shows the world what God is about.

God's love is in you my friends, and the Spirit will empower you, so don't hold it in – let God's love shine in the world.