

Our Part? Loving in Truth and Action

20th Weekend after Pentecost – October 21/22, 2006

Sermon Background Study

1 John 3:11,16-24 (NRSV)

¹¹For this is the message that you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another.

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

¹⁷How 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?

¹⁸Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action. ¹⁹And by this we will know that we are from the truth and will reassure our hearts before him ²⁰whenever our hearts condemn us; for God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything.

²¹Beloved, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have boldness before God; ²²and we receive from him whatever we ask, because we obey his commandments and do what pleases him.

²³And 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. ²⁴All 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.

*Every time we gather for worship, we do so as a community, a fellowship of believers, a *koinonía*. The apostle John reminds us that the basis of this community is mutual love, expressed not in word or speech, but in truth and action.*

I hope that you will take a few minutes and wander the hallways of St. Andrew to see all the responses that people are writing on the puzzle pieces, as I did a few days ago. The first puzzle pieces were up this week and the questions was, “What do you love about St. Andrew?” It didn’t take long to see that what people love most about St. Andrew is the love. Countless responses focused on the warmth and caring and help that people experience here at St. Andrew.

Certainly, these cards speak for my family’s experience at St. Andrew. We began worshipping here more than seven years ago and quickly discovered that St. Andrew was different from any other church either Patti or I had attended. It is hard to describe, but we simply felt a caring and concern here that spoke to us of Christ. The amazing thing, at least to me, is that as St. Andrew grew and moved to the new sanctuary, this grace-filled and energetic *koinonia* was not lost or even diminished. Rather, our size has enabled our love to be expressed in new ways, such as the many hundreds who turned out for the Habitat blitz-build in the last two weeks.

1 John

1 John was one of the last NT books to be written, perhaps very close to the end of the first century. Though 1 John is usually referred to as a letter, it is more like a pastoral essay written to encourage believers who are being confronted by false teachers and prophets in the Christian community. Indeed, read the letter with an eye to the false prophets since they are the key to why John has written it.

Compared to the logic and argument that characterizes much of Paul’s letters, this essay is much more like a musical composition. It is tightly and simply written, so much so that it is often the first NT book read by beginning Greek students. Yet, there is great power in this simplicity. C. Clifton Black writes, “[1 John] doesn’t just convey information; it does something to the listener. . . we do not interpret 1 John. It interprets us.”

Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart help us to see the intensity of John’s simple vocabulary with a study of word counts. They write, “The wonder of this little treatise is how much John can say, and say so profoundly, while using a notably limited vocabulary. But it is the very repetition of words, plus the use of stark contrasts, that is so effective. His special vocabulary tells the whole story:

To remain/continue/abide (24x) in the truth (9x) means to believe in (9x) or confess (5x) the Son (22x), to whom the Father (14x) and Spirit (8x) bear witness (12x); it means further to be born of God (10x), so as to walk (5x) in the light (6x), to hear (14x) and to know (40x) God, to keep (7x) the commandment (14x) to love (46x) the brothers and sisters (15x), and thus to have life (13x), which is from the beginning (8x) and finally to overcome (6x) the world. All of this is in contrast to the lie (7x), deceit (4x), denying Christ (3x), having a false spirit (4x), thus being antichrist (4x), walking in darkness (6x), hating (5x) one’s brothers and sisters but loving the world (23x), thus being in sin (27x), which leads to death (6x).”

Augustine wrote that 1 John points us toward little else than love (notice from the above list that John uses “love” 46 times!). It is love that expresses the nature of God, who revealed his love for us by the gift of his Son, for “We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us – and we ought to lay down our lives for one another” (1 John 3:16). In 4:7-12, John gives us a virtual theology of love. Through it all, love is never simply good feelings toward another. Love is action. We cannot claim to love God and turn our back on others. It is through loving others that we come to know and love God.

The emphasis on connection, caring, and concern at St. Andrew expressed on so many of the puzzle pieces would be embraced by the apostle John, for, as Smith writes, “3:11 marks a turning point in the letter.”¹ In the first part of the letter, John is focused on threats from outside the community, such as false teachings. Now, John turns to life within the community of believers. The community is to be first, a community of love. Love is what we are to be about. Love is what others should see in us. Now, John

Our Part

St. Andrew has made a substantial commitment to the future that will enable us to continue making disciples and serving others in extraordinary ways. But all these wonderful ways of reaching out to our community require financial resources. Our monthly electric bill averages \$28,000. We'll spend \$120,000 just keeping this place clean next year. In a few years, our mortgage will settle in at an annual payment of \$850,000! But more importantly, our staff and program expenses will continue to grow as all the ministries of the church grow. These are wonderful opportunities that require our time and our money.

In all, our projected budget for 2007 is \$5.45 million, which includes setting aside \$400,000 for debt service. The rest of the 2007 debt service, \$2.3 million, will be paid using commitments from the capital campaigns. There is a lot more information about all this in the Finance Review that is included in our giving statements and printed in Connections. This is what we need; what we have to have to stay where we are ... but it's not what we hope for.

Such growth presents many challenges. One of the most important but also most overlooked is that as we grow, it becomes harder to see the part that each of us play in this. It is tempting to look around and say to ourselves, “There are plenty of other people who can make this happen. They don't really need me. This place is huge . . . it will all work out.”

This thinking is wrong and dangerous. It won't all “just work out”. Nothing will happen. Nothing will grow. Nothing ... unless each of us, all of us, embraces the part that God asks us to play. God hasn't called any of us simply for our own sake. We are called, we are saved, so that we might do the work of his kingdom. In this, each of us has our part. We all signed on to dedicate our time, talents, gifts, and service to St. Andrew. God has given us many diverse gifts that we can put to work here. The task for each of us now is to look in the mirror and ask ourselves, - “How am I doing?”

Mature disciples of Jesus will tell you that financial giving is essential to a healthy and growing relationship with Jesus. How could it be otherwise? Our money matters a great deal to us. What we have, whether it is a lot or a little, we hold in trust for God, who expects us to use it wisely and in love. This love is not mere sentiment, it is grounded in how we live out our lives, from our commitment to compassion to the use of our money. We all have our part.

doesn't mean a love expressed in what we say or feel. Based on his letters, I'm not sure John would even call that love. Rather, John understands that Christian love is expressed in what we do - laying down our lives for one another as Christ laid down his life for us all.

John's teachings here can't come as a surprise to us. According to Jesus, the two greatest commandments are to love God and love neighbor. When asked about this, Jesus doesn't speak about believing the right things, or reading our Bibles, or attending worship regularly, or tithing. Rather, as John puts it, the message that we've heard from the beginning is that we should love one another. All the rest is important, even necessary, as we grow in our “Christlikeness” and build for God's kingdom, but it all begins with love. Simply put, love is the first thing that someone coming to St. Andrew should see. Do we care for one another in crises? Are we patient with one another? Do we take time? Do we give each other the benefit of the doubt? Do we place others ahead of ourselves? Are we genuinely helpful to one another?

Christian reassurance

How do we know that we are God's? This is a question that I'm often asked, for the truth is that no Christian is immune to doubts about his or her relationship with God. But as John urges the believers to love one another, he also tells them that by these concrete expressions of love, they will find reassurance that they are truly God's. It is in the loving that we will find our hearts comforted that we abide in Christ just as he abides in us.

But let's be honest. This loving, understood as a willingness to lay down our lives for one another (v.16), doesn't just seem daunting - it is! Who could ever love an acquaintance or even a stranger like that we say? Yet, surely this commandment to love pulls our eyes toward God. It slaps us in the face, so we see that this profound love begins and ends with God. We simply lack the power on our own to love in this way, to give when it seems we couldn't, to help when it is all we can do to keep up with our own life. It is God's Spirit, his empowering presence in and among us, that enables us to love as Christ instructed us to love. And it is in all the countless acts of love at St. Andrew that we find the love we seek for ourselves.

¹From D. M. Smith's commentary on John's letters in the *Interpretation* series.

Thru the Bible Daily Bible Readings

October 22-28

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help.

Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Sunday 1 Peter 1-3; Isaiah 33 Peter writes about being God's holy people and living among those who do not know Christ.</p>	<p>Monday 1 Peter 4-5; Isaiah 34 Being steadfast in our faith, even in the face of crises; caring for the household of God</p>
<p>Tuesday Ezekiel 1-4; Isaiah 35 Ezekiel's first vision and his commission as one of God's prophets; the first of Ezekiel's messages against Judah and Jerusalem</p>	<p>Wednesday Ezekiel 5-7; Isaiah 36 Ezekiel continues to warn of the coming destruction, even standing in the doorway of the temple and pronouncing it a "den of thieves." Jesus invoked these words and images in his own confrontation with the temple.</p>
<p>Thursday Ezekiel 8-11; Isaiah 37 Ezekiel's second vision; in chapter 10 he sees a vision of God's glory leaving the temple for God would no longer dwell there</p>	<p>Friday Ezekiel 12-15; Isaiah 37 Ezekiel's ministry is challenged; his deportation is an enactment of God's message about the coming exile</p>
<p>Saturday Ezekiel 16-19; Isaiah 39 More powerful images and metaphors regarding the wrecked relationship between God and his people</p>	

Illustration of Giving Chart

Income Level	2%	4%	6%	8%	Biblical Tithe	12%
\$40,000	800	1,600	2,400	3,200	4,000	4,800
\$60,000	1,200	2,400	3,600	4,800	6,000	7,200
\$80,000	1,600	3,200	4,800	6,400	8,000	9,600
\$100,000	2,000	4,000	6,000	8,000	10,000	12,000
\$200,000	4,000	8,000	12,000	16,000	20,000	24,000
\$300,000	6,000	12,000	18,000	24,000	30,000	36,000

This chart is easy to use. For example, a family whose household income is \$80,000 a year and is giving \$3,200 a year is contributing 4% of their income. If they want to increase their giving to 6% of their income, their pledge would increase to \$4,800. If they tithe, their annual giving would be \$8,000.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

John begins today's section of his letter by reminding the believers of "the message that you have heard from the beginning." This message, that we are to love another, leads directly to caring for others, particularly those in need. John simply can't understand how a person could claim that God's love abides in them while they are ignoring those around them who need help.

What are some ways that we, as the believing community called St. Andrew, help? You might make a list and see how long it grows. You'll find that some ways come to mind quickly but others are not so obvious. Building a new house for a family without one is a dramatic and hard-to-miss way to help. How about the quiet person who comes into the sanctuary alone, sits alone, and leaves alone? Or the acquaintance who lost a loved one? Or the parent who feels overwhelmed by child rearing? Or the one without a job and without even a prospect of a new one? Or the friend who feels trapped by the life they've chosen and doesn't know how to get out? Or the family without health insurance? When we contemplate such a list, John's words become more concrete. This is what it means to love and in this, God's Spirit, the Spirit of Christ, provides energy, determination, and discipline to do more, to love as we never thought we could.

How much of this do you see at St. Andrew? Do we love in truth and action? You might share some times that you've been helped yourself or when you've helped others. Don't fall into the trap of thinking that this is merely about finding help from all the church programs or even the church staff. This is about everyone in this community of believers. How have you been helped by someone at St. Andrew outside any "official" church function, organization, or program? Love is best delivered person-to-person.