

21 April 2024

Word, Speech, Deed, Truth

1 John 3:16-24

Today we read from the first letter of John, chapter 3, verses 16-24.

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.

“We know love by this,” our reading begins. Well, that sounds promising. It would be wonderful to know how to distinguish between genuine love and earnest politeness or manipulation by someone who wants something from us, right? It’s not always easy, and the English language doesn’t help. As you may have heard in other sermons, other languages (notably Greek) recognize that there are different kinds of love and have different words for them. English just dumps them all into one pot, with the result that we can say that we love Jesus in one breath and that we love western movies or Mario Kart or honey-roasted cashews in the next. So, again, this is good. 1 John 3 is going to tell us how to recognize actual love. Let’s see what John says.

Verse 16: *We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another.* All right, that’s setting a high bar, but it’s not wrong. Giving your life for someone is an act of love. And even when that extreme sacrifice isn’t required – I mean, it doesn’t always come up – love is self-giving. Verse 17: *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?* Love is unselfish with gifts and possessions. Or, to express it positively, love is generous. And notice also that this verse expands love to more people. Here we’re not talking about love for a person, but about love for any person in need. Love should be deep *and* wide. Verse 18: *Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.* This feels helpful, right? Love is more than just words, more than just saying “I love you.” It has to involve actions, too. And also truth. Hmm, that’s a little less clear there. “Truth” is a word that’s almost as squishy as “love.” What does John mean here by “truth”? Does he just mean honesty, or is there more? Well, good news! John goes on to talk about that in verses 19 and 20. *And by this we will know that we are from the truth and will reassure our hearts before him whenever our hearts condemn us; for God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything.*

Sigh. After all my years of intensive biblical study, one of the things I enjoy least is telling people that I’m not sure what a passage of scripture means, but I’m getting better at it

with practice. I read this in other translations, I checked commentaries, I went back and read it in Greek. (It was even worse there: just as puzzling *and* in Greek.) My best guess is that John is saying that when we love as described – with selfless generosity, in both word and action – then we can feel confident that we are aligned with God’s truth, even when we don’t feel that we are. To put it more concretely, when you get caught up in a guilt doom-spiral, despairing as to whether you can ever be good enough for God, then take a breath. Don’t ask yourself “Will I ever be a better person?” but rather “Do I love others?” If you do, be reassured. Our confidence is not based on how virtuous we are, but on whether we love others.

Right. Let’s press on. Verses 21-22: *Beloved, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have boldness before God; and we receive from him whatever we ask, because we obey his commandments and do what pleases him.* Okay, there may be several questions about this. First, don’t get too excited about that “we get whatever we ask from God” business. It’s not a blank check. Notice the precondition for that promise is that we are already obeying his commandments and doing what pleases him. But that leads to another question: “Wait, didn’t we just say that loving others was more important than keeping a clean conscience? It’s getting a bit muddled here. Now keeping commandments seems to be required. Which commandments? All of them? Any in particular? Fortunately, the passage goes on to deal with this question. Verse 23: *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.* So let’s summarize where we are. We are to love selflessly and generously, not just in words, but also in truth and action. What is truth? Love, basically. And what action are we talking about? Keeping the commandments. What commandment? To love.

If I were still teaching and this were in a student essay, I would have some words with that student about clarity and organization, about using an outline and having clear transitions when moving from point to point. But, as it happens, no one has asked me to grade the Bible. Probably an oversight. So we work with what we have, and what we have is sort of like a Zen *koan*, a saying designed not to be understood but to be meditated on. Or to use another comparison, it’s like one of those word maps – you know, the ones where a lot of people are asked to write down what words come to mind in a certain situation, and their answers are compiled into a jumble, with frequently used words printed in larger font than less common words. In the jumbled word map of 1 John 3, we have self-giving, love, generosity, truth, conscience, action, love, more than words, believe, reassurance, love, keeping commandments, and love. So how do we know love? By its self-sacrificing, generous, pure commitment to keeping faith with Christ by keeping his commandment, which is primarily . . . to love.

Yes, it’s completely circular, but it always circles back to love. Love is at the beginning and the end. But along the way, we see that love is deeper and more complex than we might think. It’s more than words, more than a feeling, more than one part of our lives. If we’re doing it right, it is how we think and move and act and breathe.

Many of you, I imagine, are familiar with the concept of the Five Love Languages. A counselor named Gary Chapman came up with this list in his practice, to describe how different people interpret different things as expressions of love. Chapman published this tool, and the book became a massive bestseller, which Chapman has turned into a multi-million-dollar industry. There are Five Love Languages for teens, children, seniors, spouses, friends, and so on. There are videos and classroom helps and who knows what all – all available at 5lovelanguages.com. Good for him. Yes, Chapman is mining every last chunk of ore from this

bonanza, but the only reason he can do that is because something in his description of love has resonated with millions. So what are those Five Love Languages? First, *Acts of Service*. Some people care more about actions than words. Second: *Receiving Gifts*. Some people are most moved by a thoughtful gift. Third: *Quality Time*, just being with the other. Fourth, *Words of Affirmation*. For some people, words are crucial. They need to hear it. And fifth, Physical Touch.

Huh, it feels like I've come across some of those things before: something I read once about love being self-giving and generous and marked by both actions and words. In fact, nearly all Chapman's Love Languages show up in our word map scripture in 1 John 3. (By the way, that's not an accident. Chapman is a devout Christian. He's also read 1 John.) What John is saying is that love is deep and rich and complicated and sometimes contradictory, and it's also our only access to truth and our prime directive from the Lord. And the practical clarity that Chapman brings to that is that different people hear love in different ways, so we need to learn to express love in many ways. Because, again, the most important message that any of us has to give to anyone – and, in fact, to everyone – is love. It always circles back to love.

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I had an interesting experience a week ago. Last Saturday Tim Atkins and I were at a District seminar with Methodists from around Northwest Wisconsin, and at the end of that day, we had Communion together. It wasn't a huge crowd, so they tried a different style of Communion. We all stood in a circle and passed the elements to each other, each person serving the one to their left. Well, that was the plan, anyway. But it kept falling apart. After two or three people, somehow, it would end up with people passing the cup to the next person, who served himself, then passed it on. After another three or four people, someone would try to straighten it out and would deliberately serve the person to her left. But three people down the line, the pattern would flip back to each person serving himself. I was near the end of the circle, so I got to watch the struggle through several cycles. It was as if we kept forgetting to ask ourselves which was the real point: to receive the elements or to serve them to others.

Love's kind of like that: it starts out with each caring for the other, but we do tend to flip back to our default settings and revert to seeing to our own needs. Chapman's great frustration with the way that his Five Love Languages has been used is that this tool that was developed to help people better express their love for others has been turned into another online personality quiz, where people figure out their own love language so they can tell others how better to love them. Like I said, self-centeredness is our default setting. That's why our scripture today began as it did: *We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another*. There's your challenge for this week. Give of yourself to others. That's what love is. Amen.