

Scripture Reading for April 25th 2021

1 John 2:9-11; 3:11—24 (NIV)

⁹ Anyone who claims to be in the light but hates a brother or sister is still in the darkness.

¹⁰ Anyone who loves their brother and sister lives in the light, and there is nothing in them to make them stumble. ¹¹ But anyone who hates a brother or sister is in the darkness and walks around in the darkness. They do not know where they are going, because the darkness has blinded them.

¹¹ For this is the message you heard from the beginning: We should love one another. ¹² Do not be like Cain, who belonged to the evil one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his own actions were evil and his brother's were righteous. ¹³ Do not be surprised, my brothers and sisters, if the world hates you. ¹⁴ We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love each other. Anyone who does not love remains in death. ¹⁵ Anyone who hates a brother or sister is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life residing in him.

¹⁶ This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters. ¹⁷ 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?

¹⁸ Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth.

¹⁹ This is how we know that we belong to the truth and how we set our hearts at rest in his presence: ²⁰ If our hearts condemn us, we know that God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything. ²¹ Dear friends, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have confidence before God ²² and receive from him anything we ask, because we keep his commands and do what pleases him. ²³ And this is his command: to believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and to love one another as he commanded us. ²⁴ The one who keeps God's commands lives 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.

Sermon: Love with Actions and in Truth

Our reading presented vivid contrasts in terms of hate and love, of lies and truth, of darkness and light, of death - even murder - and life.¹ That dualistic language is typical of the writer of 1 John, who is also widely regarded as the author of John's gospel.² Today many people don't like dogma, or black-and-white rhetoric, and instead prefer nuance, gray, and slippery non-absolutes. Nevertheless, strong, polarized language was evident in America this week with the trial and verdict of Derek Chauvin for the death of George Floyd. The outcome was either "guilty" or "not-guilty." Some things *are* clearly black and white. Racism³ and police brutality are unacceptable. Period. Black Lives Matter. There *are* some issues we simply *can't* fudge. But having said that, identifying the issues is only the first step. We then have to tackle them head-on. And that requires a paradigm shift in cultural thinking. It means radical change, not mere words. It involves reforming laws *and* the behaviour of individuals, and a that of society as a whole. Whether true lasting change can happen as a result of this atrocity, we will have to see. *Never* give up hope; I'm sure Martin Luther King Jr. would agree on that. And so would Jesus. Yet at the center of any lasting transformation is something that moves the human heart *from hating to loving*. And that is prominently featured in our reading this morning from 1 John, as we will discover.

Before we delve into our Lectionary reading for today, let me provide some background context. 1 John is thought to have been written no earlier than 100 CE, and probably a decade or two after John's gospel.⁴ It's not structured as a formal letter, but is a sermon or an instruction pamphlet that would likely have been circulated to the house churches of John's community – possibly in the region of Ephesus, in modern-day Turkey. This document was written to address a specific purpose, to oppose a movement that departed from John's community's traditional beliefs concerning Jesus.⁵ That's one reason why the rhetoric can appear so black and white. The issue in question may seem strange to us as well. Today, many people question whether Jesus could really have been *divine*, preferring to consider him as simply a good human being. John and the opposing movement *both* believed Jesus was the *divine* Word, *that wasn't* the problem. Rather, John's opposition *didn't* think Jesus was *truly* human, the Word *made flesh*, and therefore that Jesus didn't eat, drink, or do the normal physical things that we all do. And, in particular, Jesus *didn't* suffer or die – because in their view, divine beings *can't* do either!⁶ That's why John stresses the *humanity* of the divine "word of life" in this letter.⁷ John is,

¹ 1 John also contrasts those *for* Christ and those *against* – antichrists or false prophets (see 1 John 2:18-27; 4:1-6).

² And if the author of that "letter" is *not* the "beloved disciple" – considered to be the author of the 4th gospel, then it was a close colleague or disciple of "John." And a casual reading of John's gospel also quickly reveals *its* dualistic tone.

³ Institutional racism also exists in Canada, and is also within elements of the Presbyterian Church – as we heard at Presbytery this last week.

⁴ Scholars' debate whether it was written before or after John's gospel, but that need not concern us here. Traditionally, it is considered that 1 John was written in Ephesus. There are significant linguistic/thematic similarities between the two works, see: John 1:1,14 / 1 John 1:1; John 3:21 / 1 John 1:6-7; John 5:24 / 1 John 3:14; John 15:7 / 1 John 2:24; John 15:12 / 1 John 3:23; John 20:31 / 1 John 5:13.

⁵ See 1 John 2:24; 4:1-6. (The movement being opposed was most-likely Docetism, under the umbrella of Gnosticism.)

⁶ Today we call this "divine impassibility." It's a feature of classical theism and is a merger of Greek and Christian thinking.

⁷ See 1 John 1:1; 4:2. (Jesus was regarded as a "shape-shifter," who only *seemed* physical but was a spiritual being all along.)

essentially, the wise old man who is *encouraging* the next generation of Christians to hold on fast to the original gospel message in those confusing times.⁸ John is aware of the oppressive nature of those *external* forces on the Christian community, that causes them to doubt themselves, and he provides both reassurance and an antidote. The remedy, according to John, is “*to love one another.*”⁹ What that means in practice we will see in a moment, but he is primarily addressing the Christian community, the church *itself* here. He is saying that, first and foremost, your *internal* relationships will give you strength to address *external* stressors. Now that *doesn’t* mean we *shouldn’t* love our neighbor - or our enemy, rather, *if* we don’t demonstrate our *love* to those we call our “friends” then we have a *real* problem! Moreover, this message is nothing new, says John, this is what Jesus himself said to his disciples just before he died. Remember: “A new command I give you: *Love one another.* As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.”¹⁰

The writer of 1 John contrasts that love ideal with hatred by recalling the prototypical story of Cain who killed his brother Abel.¹¹ You will remember that in that murderous event, Cain’s response to God’s enquiry as to the whereabouts of his brother was, “Am I my brother’s keeper?”¹² The writer of 1 John would affirm, “YES, you are!”¹³ And in his black and white thinking, where love is *not* shared, then there is hatred.¹⁴ So, don’t be trapped in hate and paralyzed by fear, instead, remember – says John - the words of Jesus: “Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.”¹⁵ How do we know John had these words on his mind? Because in 1 John 3:16 we read: “This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ *laid down his life for us.* And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters.”

The basis of the love commandment rests, then, upon Jesus and *his* decision to love us – even unto death, death on a cross.¹⁶ It may well be that this community’s opponents, who apparently doubted that Jesus had a genuine, human, fleshly existence, saw that as the basis to call into question the *depth* of Christ’s sacrificial love. After all, if Jesus only *appeared* to be human, then he only *appeared* to suffer. And if Jesus had a divine free-pass on experiencing pain, then Jesus’ call for his followers’ steadfastness under hardship was simply hollow and inauthentic. That is *not* the truth, says John – it’s all lies. Jesus really *did* lay down his life for us, and he only wants us to be willing to do what he, in fact, did.¹⁷ If love, then, is known *in action*, how do we know God’s love? It is through God’s action in sending Jesus Christ

⁸ See 1 John 1:5; 3:11.

⁹ 1 John 3:11.

¹⁰ John 13:34-35 (and John 15:12, 17; 1 John 2:7-11).

¹¹ 1 John 3:12-15; Gen 4:1-16.

¹² Gen 4:9b.

¹³ This is also mirrored in the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37) and the question, “Who is my neighbor?”

¹⁴ From this perspective, it should be no surprise that the world “hates” the Christian community. Jesus already warned his disciples of that (jealous) hatred in John 15:18–20 (cf. 1 John 3:13).

¹⁵ John 15:12–13.

¹⁶ See Phil 2:8; Rom 5:8 (See also 1 John 1:7b, where the “blood of Jesus” is mentioned.)

¹⁷ See 1 John 2:6.

to the world, and through Christ's actions and his laying down of his own life for us. These actions reveal what God is like.¹⁸

The same test applies to our us. How will others know what's in our heart? By *our* actions. This notion of "laying down our life" is daunting. From time to time, we hear of someone who has put themselves in grave danger in the rescue of others, such as running into a burning building, or saving someone from rising floodwaters. Such extraordinary acts demonstrate a self-sacrificial love of humanity, the love of a stranger even. But those unusual acts of heroism are *not* what is on John's mind here; he is very down to earth, saying: "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? Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth."¹⁹

As I said earlier, John is speaking primarily to the Christian community whose identity is founded on their common love of Jesus. Since it is that love which binds us together, says John, then demonstrate that *in action* by those who are rich being generous to others in the community who are in need. Many today, including myself, find these words uncomfortable and very challenging. In part, it is because we tend to ascent to the truth of the gospel *with our minds*. It's also because, on a global scale, we are rich!²⁰ I think it's also particularly problematic for Protestants because we have been raised with the Reformation mantra that we are saved "by *faith alone*" (*sola fides*). However, that is *not* the case; even Paul agrees faith and love are bound together in a single package.²¹ Saving faith results in active love - even the self-sacrificial action of laying down our lives - or our self-interest - for one another.²² It is not *me* saying this, it is John, who writes: "This is [God's] command: to first believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ and, second, to love one another as he commanded us. The one who keeps God's commands lives 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."²³ We therefore cannot believe in Jesus Christ without also believing in love, and we cannot have love without action. John gives us no room to negotiate. Walking "in the light" means loving one's fellow believers.²⁴ To refuse to perform such acts of love is to *close* one's heart; *both* faith *and* ethics matter - and it's not one without the other. This combination of faith and love are the gifts of grace, both are God's work within us. The apostle Paul describes them as the fruit of the Spirit.²⁵ The good news here is that when *we* act lovingly, we can be assured that nothing less is being demonstrated than the love of God in Jesus Christ. The very love of God incarnate is always present in every act of love. As we abide in Christ, John tells us, Christ abides in us.

¹⁸ John 3:16-17.

¹⁹ 1 John 3:17-18.

²⁰ The challenge of global poverty can overwhelm us. Perhaps that's why John doesn't speak of the poor in the collective or generic sense, but speaks of a brother and sister in the local Christian community.

²¹ "The only thing that counts is faith working through love" (Gal 5:6b).

²² Note the *mutuality* in "one another"!

²³ 1 John 3:23-24. See also John 6:29.

²⁴ 1 John 1:6; 2:9-11. See also Matt 7:16-20; James 1:22; 2:16. We can also extend this to the world at large, but it starts within the local fellowship of believers.

²⁵ See Gal 5:22-23 - faith and love are included in his (practical) list.

That challenging exhortation is followed up with reassurance. John is writing to young Christians who are in danger of falling away or being permanently wounded because of this controversy. The consistent test of genuine Christianity is whether our actions will match our profession of faith, says John. And a person and – indeed - a community will develop *mature* character by resisting evil and lies, and by *not* letting doubts about the identity of Jesus prevail. John also knows that while proud hearts occasionally need humbling, much more often humble hearts need *lifting*. Being downcast is *not* a sin, but it is destructive. And Christians who have a sensitive conscience can often be plagued by a sense of guilt and inadequacy. That’s why John says, even though our *feelings* may condemn us, God is greater than our feelings.²⁶ In a sense, how you feel about yourself is *not* what really matters, but how *God sees you*. God knows our loves and our longings. God hears our confessions and is aware of our dreams, as well as our sin.²⁷ The world around us may judge us by our actions or inaction, but God judges us by the contents of our hearts – and that’s *not* a source of terror but of *hope*.²⁸ Churches need that reassurance so that despair does not take root.

Let me conclude. You often hear the expression, “Charity begins at home.” That is also what the writer of 1 John is saying, practical love begins *within* the relationships of a community of faith - with people you know and who share a common belief in Jesus as the divine “Word made flesh,” who modeled God’s love in action for us. John makes that lofty love principle very practical: people who have resources and goods are to open their hearts to people who are in need – not out of legalism or guilt, but *love*. Therefore, let us allow the love of God to reorient us to needs of others. This new way of living doesn’t stop at the doors of the church, but continues beyond. It must go out into the streets, into our workplaces, and wherever God’s children find themselves amongst those who are in need. We must not just talk about our faith in Jesus, or sing about it, we must put love into action to make that faith real.

As I mentioned at the beginning, we live in the world of violence, and murder, whether its root cause is racial, religious, or greed, or whether it is between individuals or nation states. This cycle of revenge, abuse - even wars – is ongoing. It can only stop with a change of heart, beginning one person at a time. It is courageous love in action that will eventually overcome the hatred that is within racism and violence. It is love that will enable us to stand publicly besides victims of injustice. Love brings with it the hope of healing and peace. Will people know we are Christians by our love?

I end with the words of John: “Let us love *not* in words or speech, but *in truth and action*.”²⁹ Amen.

²⁶ See 1 John 3:20-21.

²⁷ See 1 John 1:8 – 2:2.

²⁸ In 1 John 3:22, he also links the community’s living out those principles of love with prayers being answered.

²⁹ 1 John 3:18.