

## **“Love In Action” – 1 John 3:16-24 – Easter 4 – May 7, 2006**

It has been an interesting struggle to write this sermon. It has been interesting for two different but complimentary reasons. The first is that of scheduling, of a more-than-usual demand on time, or is it a less-than-usual availability of time? For the past two days, Friday and Saturday, four of us from Central – Sunny, Rhoda, Gillan and me – attended the conference put on by the PEF-PIM Board (that’s the Presbyterian Extension Fund, who provide loans for church expansion, and Presbyterian Innovative Ministries who provide grants for new and experimental ministry projects such as the Hummingbird Ministries.) This conference featured Dr. Kennon Callahan, who presented a great deal of useful information and ways to both help a congregation to be healthy and to grow. The conference was a hugely affirming exercise, confirming that we are doing many things that he suggests congregations that look to a healthy future both should do and actually do. The conference wrapped up with a dinner/dance at the Vancouver Yacht Club last night, providing an opportunity to chat with other participants, to review what we had learned, and to continue to have fun and enjoy the whole process.

Dr. Callahan, I was pleased to hear, used the expression “have fun” almost as often as I do. Since he shares my view that “church must be fun” I consider him to be highly intelligent, very smart, clever, highly attuned to the right things in life, and generally a wonderful fellow. Most people who agree with me fall into that category!

However, and that brings me to the second interesting challenge in tackling this reading from 1 John, is the content, which at first glance looks anything like fun. Whenever I run across a reading from scripture that is full of words like ‘obey’ and ‘commandments’ I am usually inclined to turn the page, to find something a little less oriented to “you should.” Heaven knows that we can hear enough of those kinds of instructions anywhere, and certainly in the church. “Do this” ... or, as we are more likely to hear from those who love the “you should” passages, “don’t do that.” It shouldn’t be a surprise, I guess, that the popular view of the church as seen by the world outside our doors is that of drab, colourless people, usually thin and pinched, scowling through warden-like steel-rimmed glasses, frowning at all of God’s creation, wagging the finger and saying, “don’t!” Or the other popular view of the church as a tightly-knit, hard-to-get-into, ever-smiling group of robotic singing clones “happily, happily” and blissfully ignoring the realities of life.

And I have to admit that my first reading (and indeed, my fifth or sixth!) of the text in 1 John had me reacting with my usual “I don’t want to go there!” But I began to notice that although the initial tone looks like a complete lack of grace, with a bit of understanding the grace of God does indeed come shining out of this passage. The argument is presented all backwards.

Take the end verse, for example. “All 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.” So many people rush to the opposite of this, quick to invert what is being said, to corrupt it with the condemnation that “if you don’t obey his commandments, then you have no connection with Christ.” Well, yes, but almost always the commandments such people have in mind are legalistic religious observances, and that is the complete opposite of what is being called for here.

Back up just one verse, and we begin to get a sense that something other than legalism is being asked from us. “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.” Hmmm, love one another. That doesn’t sound much like peeking through keyholes to see if all the rules are being faithfully kept, does it? Love one another ... that doesn’t sound much like keeping a little black book to record all of the transgressions to make sure that none of them are forgotten. To be sure, there are people who will

argue that keeping such little black books of sins and transgressions is what Jesus meant by 'love', but we don't have to read back too many verses here to see that quite the opposite is the case.

"And by this we will know we are from the truth ..." we read in verse 19, and go on to discover that from whatever 'this' is we will have reassured hearts, and affirmation that by doing whatever 'this' is that we will receive whatever we ask because we have pleased God. Well, if we're to receive such blessings from being obedient and doing 'this', surely we would want to know what 'this' is, wouldn't we? Is the 'this' that confers such blessings on us the ability to live a sinless life? Is the source of pleasing God the ability to always look squeaky-clean, with happy smiles on every face, including the 2.4 children, dog and cat? Short answer: No. Long answer: go back one more verse and discover the real way that our obedience will please God and reassure our hearts. Back one verse, to verse 18, and we come to the heart of this message, "Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action." Ahhh, now it's starting to come a little clearer ... in truth, and in action ... but what kind of action?

And, following our step-back-and-look pattern, we discover the question that started this whole line of thought, namely "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?" Now that's pretty specific, isn't it, especially when put together with the prefacing remark that "we know love by this, that [Jesus] laid down his life for us – and we ought to lay down our lives for one another." Set against the magnificent gift of God's grace in Christ Jesus we can rephrase this question – how can we, with the abundant gift of God's grace offered to us fail to proclaim the availability of God's grace to those who do not yet understand it is there for the taking?

But as true and as important as that is, it is still a bit too 'churchy' to accurately convey the impassioned drive behind this message. This is an appeal to action in faith. Not to nice words; not to beatific smiles; not to little black books of rules or sins; but to loving, caring, grace-filled concrete actions of loving help. The message here is a clarion call to all who claim to be followers of Christ to offer community breakfasts; sandwiches and boiled eggs to street people; clean dry socks to street people; Christmas and Thanksgiving and Easter and 'just because' food hampers to struggling families.

And after a couple of days of listening to an expert on church growth and dynamics, and nodding and saying, "yes, we're doing some of that already", can you see why I am so delighted with you? In so many ways you as individuals and we as a faithful group are abiding in Christ, and assured that Christ is abiding in us, for we can observe the Spirit he has given us at work in us. We see the Spirit at work in us in the generous offerings of time, effort and money for brothers and sisters not only in our lanes and streets but across the world as well. We see the Spirit at work in us affirming God's pleasure at acts of kindness and generosity offered in Christ's name.

I could go on and on, but I won't. I admit I'm tired this morning, and that it will be more effective for you to simply look around at your brothers and sisters in faith and recognize how they are following Christ's commandment to love one another, and to see how they recognize the same in you.

Little children, let us continue to love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action, and be assured we are abiding in Christ, and Christ is abiding in us.