

### **“We Know Love By This ...” – 1 John 3:16-24 – Easter 4**

Preparing this sermon has been an interesting challenge, 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? In addition to the routine matters in the church I once again had the task of chairing the monthly meeting of the Central Committee of Presbytery. On top of that we have had a couple of meetings with Seniors' groups in the West End to give overview presentations of our redevelopment project, in order to get feedback and hopefully support as we get more involved with the City (which is this week's challenge!) Although it has been a challenge to find time to do some reading and research for today, it has also been fun.

Part of that reading includes a review of literature on the topic of Missional Churches, a subject that relates to congregations that have a healthy “looking-outwards” perspective on living out their faith in the community. One of the authors in the field is Dr. Kennon Callahan, who has refreshing ideas that help a congregation to be healthy and to grow. At one conference I attended where he was the keynote speaker, 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 naturally consider him to be highly intelligent, very smart, extremely clever, highly attuned to the right things in life, and generally a wonderful fellow. Of course, 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 of this ‘letter’, 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 towards a heavy use of “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 clones singing “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, so let’s start at the end and work towards the beginning.

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 in an ironic twist almost always the commandments that such people have in mind when they think of disobedience are legalistic religious observances, and that is the complete opposite of what is being called for here.

Now back up just one verse, and we begin to understand 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.

Backing up one more sentence we find, "And by this we will know we are from the truth ..." 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, large SUV, 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?

So what truth and action would constitute making this God-like love? We think of the constant prophetic voice from the Old Testament calling God's faithful to "love justice and walk humbly with your God." We hear the words of Jesus proclaiming "when you did it – i.e. fed the hungry, clothed the naked, healed the sick, comforted the lonely and grieving – to the least of these, you did it to me" and are reminded that true love is a verb, not a noun. Even in Matthew's gospel where we often hear a hint of observance to rules we hear the clear countering condemnation of the Scribes and Pharisees who "laid impossible burdens upon the people and lifted not a finger to help them."

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. That includes much of what we already do in reaching out into our community, with the community breakfasts; bread freely available; the food bank; help with immigration and intercultural issues; a place where community groups can meet to carry on their helping tasks; the Christmas and Thanksgiving dinners, and a place for people to find spiritual peace and healing. 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.

God willing – and so far God seems to be not only willing but actively pushing and promoting our redevelopment project – we will soon have expanded facilities to offer even more

of Christ's active love within our community. That is both challenging and exciting, but also reassuring that in doing so we are hearing and responding to the calls of scripture to believe in the name of God's Son Jesus Christ and to love one another just as he has commanded us. In that truth and action we will continue to know love by this, that he abides in us by the Spirit he has given us, and that is a wonderful thing indeed. I could go on and on, but I won't. I admit I'm a bit 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.