

Love One Another

¹¹For this is the message you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another. ¹²We must not be like Cain who was from the evil one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his own deeds were evil and his brother's righteous. ¹³Do not be astonished, brothers and sisters,^[d] that the world hates you. ¹⁴We know that we have passed from death to life because we love one another. Whoever does not love abides in death. ¹⁵All who hate a brother or sister^[e] are murderers, and you know that murderers do not have eternal life abiding in them. 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^[f] 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.

April 22, 2018

“Love in Truth and Action”

1 John 3:11-24

Kerra Becker English

Let’s remember the genre of this scripture text as we move forward in continuing to interpret it. It’s a letter, or sermon, or some sort of religious apologetic that wants to convince us what it means to be a follower of Christ. These aren’t directly Jesus’ words. These are words about following and understanding Jesus’ words. Though they are scripture, they aren’t what we call “gospel,” the direct stories about Jesus. And for the first readers of this letter, something that might be obscure to us, but well known to them, was that the writer had a clear idea of who the in group and out group were at the time.

Yes, yes, yes – some brilliant and poetic and wonderful things are said about love in this letter, all in the name of Jesus. We will get to those in a minute. However, because this letter has been given the weight and heft of being included in scripture, there are portions of it that can easily become justification for the divisiveness in both church and culture we still see so prevalently in our own time. How does it do this? 1st John justifies hating on the haters – something we may also be inclined to do.

Don’t be like Cain. His deeds were evil and he was rotten to the core. So, if you are like him and hate your brother or sister? You are no better than a murderer. You won’t get into heaven. The letter writer is that bold in his claim; hate = murder, and murderers don’t get eternal life. And since we have permission in our holy book to make the holy rules, it’s only a small step for preachers and congregants alike to grant themselves the permission to be the judge and

arbiter of other people's lives. You can call the other Cain or the devil; you can point fingers at those you believe to be influenced by the evil one. You get to decide who has enough hate in their heart, or little enough belief in their soul to miss the mark. And if the world hates you because of your amazing sense of righteousness, awesome! Because then you are doing your job of preserving the purity of "right-thinking" religion.

Good or bad, righteous or evil, saint or sinner. That's part of the dualistic kind of thinking that comes across in this letter, as if we were able to control the behavior or the thinking of others, as if calling them evil murderers is the way to help them correct their wrongful ways and come back to the fold. In some ways, that thinking has worked over time. The threat that Christians continue to hold over people is exactly the one mentioned here – heaven or hell. Do you know where your going? Are you keeping in line enough to get there? It's a tactic so ingrained in our system that we almost don't have to say it anymore. It's implied. You get religion to get saved, and you get saved to earn a spot in eternal glory. It's so much a part of the Christian language that those no longer held by that threat have left the church in droves. They see it primarily as a Christian statement of judgment, and they're not buying it anymore.

But even though it's clear to me that kind of "right or wrong" logic has been used over and over again to justify religious persecution of the "other" on a huge array of issues, I see where the letter writer's intent was going, and I will gladly fall into the very same trap for the very same reasons in my own preaching, and letter writing, and defense of religious truth. The letter writer is making a defense of "love" as the central tenet of the Christian faith. That does echo Jesus' words. Jesus was pretty clear, and exceedingly repetitive about that. Love God. Love your neighbor. Love your enemies. Love your persnickety family members. Love your friends.

Love them so much that you would give your life for them. That's love. And once you do all that – go out and love and serve some more.

The author of this text is trying really hard to follow Jesus on this, maybe even trying to lead people to do the same, and it's become a mess. It always does. Love is hard. Love isn't as clear cut as making rules, or even charting beliefs. It seems simple to say, but it's much, much, much harder to put into practice. So, the author attempts to do what Jesus subtly refrained from doing, which is to define what love is or isn't. Jesus told a few stories about love. He demonstrated the extent to which love would live into the truth by continuing to stand for love all the way to the cross. But given that this author was attempting to use words, the tools of my own trade, to get this message across, it becomes problematic. What is it to love? Is hate really the opposite of love? If I'm having a really bad day with my sister... If my kids are being particularly rude to each other... is that worth eternal damnation? Is it our responsibility or obligation to call out the haters and make them feel ashamed for their lack of compassion?

Jesus was a little more Taylor Swift in this regard. Haters gonna hate, hate, hate, hate, hate, but he's just gonna shake it off, shake it off. I'm not always so inclined to do that. Jesus knew what he could and couldn't control. As I get older, I'm more aware of how little I can change myself. But as a leader in Jesus' way, the temptation is there for me to call out the empty "thoughts and prayers" and demand that love be based more in truth and action. That's where I have great sympathy for this early church leader who was trying to create community based around love. I hear this "John" we don't really know very well claiming how important it is to be loving, so important that he sees its opposite as destroying the gift of eternal life promised with Christ's resurrection.

To be a religious leader in a specific community of people one must be willing to learn and set and keep boundaries for what it means to be a part of that community. In that way, religious communities are exclusive. Sometimes there are beliefs or behaviors that will put a person on the outside of that circle. That's why we learn theology in seminary. That's why we have disciplinary rules in place if someone is doing damage to the community with their actions. Now in spiritually mature communities – everyone becomes part of that leadership – and the boundaries are put in place to keep people safe and to express the fullness of God's love to God's beloved children without setting up false discriminations or such rigid codes of belief that no one can really keep them. But as we know, even from reading the Bible, that communities can easily find their idols to worship. Or poor religious leaders can be boundary-less and get run over. Or the boundaries can be so strict and arbitrary as to constrict the flow of love.

I recently read an article about the recent usages of the word “inclusive.” We use inclusive to mean that someone has a place at our table. But if it's our table to begin with and we feel we have the right to give permission, or not for someone to be seated, then that word may not be as loving as we thought it to be. It may be OK then to say that our church is in some ways exclusive in practice – we do the things we can do for the people that we can do them for. And then it's important to remember that we aren't the only show in town. Sometimes we aren't the right cup of tea for that person who gives our worshiping community a try, but that doesn't mean that God doesn't have a place for them. Because this gift of life is not an invitation to just OUR table, it is an invitation to God's table. God's love always includes, always welcomes, always loves. ALWAYS. God has set a seat for everyone, EVERYONE. Jesus doesn't put anyone outside of the circle of love, not enemies, not haters, not murderers. Remember who he forgave, all those he forgave – from the cross.

This early church leader is trying to say that about the intensity of God's love, AND hold a sense of what it takes to be a part of such a community where love is the greatest value. I get it. It's the same thing I tend to say myself. It bothers me when Christians don't seem all that loving to each other. I want to call out the haters too. It feels to me like they are murdering the intent of what it means to be the church. I want to kick out the ones who betray the children, and act violently, and say that they are holier than everybody else, and then tell lies and show by their actions that the only person that they care about is themselves. This letter could send me reeling down that path. Let's call ourselves to love, not in word and speech – but in truth and action. AMEN to that. I'm with you brother John.

But then I remember, I remember that Jesus love reaches beyond the scope of MY community, beyond the vision of OUR community, and out into every single corner of the universe. So how do we say it? How do we preach it? How do we teach our seminary interns to go out into their next churches and practice the never-ending community of God's love in a community that will be full of real people and likely be a complete mess? Just like this I suppose. Keep love ever and always at the center. Set boundaries – when you must. Because you will have to in order to maintain community. You can't be everything to everyone. It just isn't possible. But remember that there is a place for absolutely EVERYONE – and it may or may not be here at Ashland Presbyterian Church, or at the church our interns go out to serve. That's OK. We are responsible for proclaiming the message of eternal life – and unlike the perception of Christianity that's out there – saving souls is God's work – not something on our to-do list.

Enjoy the mess of being a community based on love. It's not now, nor has it ever been easy to define. And yet it's the only kind of community God really expects from any of us. Amen.

Charge to Andrew:

We don't know yet where Andrew will be heading after graduation. When he started with us, he envisioned that it might be into chaplaincy, and then as an associate pastor, and now maybe, just maybe the doors are opening for him to consider solo pastor work. As a church family, I think you help it to be possible for students to see their identities in the role of doing it all – and that's quite an accomplishment. It's scary to think about preaching every week, and moderating Session meetings, and being the one hanging out in the office and making decisions – coming right out of seminary. But I think Andrew is ready for that challenge – or for whatever ministry challenge he decides to take.

I pray for him to be inspired by this quirky letter of first John. Once I started reading through it in the lectionary as the post-Easter texts – it seemed highly appropriate to describe the ways in which we try to define ourselves in ministry, especially as faith leaders. We keep coming back to love, and what it means for us, and how it defines who we are. We are called at times to say what it is and to say what it isn't. We strive to know Christ, and who he is, and when he is proclaimed in false ways. We want to inspire the children to courage and strength and nudge the elders to lean into their wisdom. We, as pastors, are proclaimers of truth and morality, but we are also human beings trying to live into that truth and morality. These are not easy lines to walk, nor are the boundaries really ever as clear cut as we would like them to be. Doing church is messy. Leading church is to choose to be a ringmaster of the barely organized chaos.

I've told Andrew many of my stories of being in the mess, and sometimes front and center in the mess. But it is a blessing, and a learning experience, and holy – absolutely holy.

We send you today Andrew into the church – to proclaim love, not just with words and speech, but bodily in truth and action. You have been called. You have said, “Here I am.” And you are being sent. God is preparing the way you may not quite know yet, so you can tell your people, God’s people about their place of welcome at God’s ginormous table.