

SERMON TITLE: “Living and Loving After Easter”

TEXT: 1 John 3:11-24

PREACHED AT: Neighbourhood Church

BY: Ryan Dueck

DATE: May 3, 2009/Fourth Sunday of Easter

We’re still officially in Easter time and will be until Pentecost (which this year is on May 31). And so for the past few weeks we have continued to reflect on what the resurrection means for us as we walk into the weeks and months that follow the climax of the Christian year.

Two weeks ago, James spoke of building our house on the rock, and how as the first disciples knew, and virtually every follower of Jesus for the last two thousand years is well aware, storms do come—even after Easter.

Last week James talked about the road to Emmaus and how Jesus comes to his disciples after his death and resurrection. James talked about how Jesus invites our questions and promises to walk with us and give us the answers we need even if he doesn’t always give us the answers we want.

Well, today we’re going to talk about another element of our reality as post-resurrection followers of Jesus and this one is focused less on what *God* has done or on what the cross has accomplished, and more on how *we* are to live.

We’ve been spending a lot of time in the gospels in the last few months. And the gospels obviously tell a crucial part of our story as Christians. But today we’re going to go to the *other* end of the New Testament to the little book of 1 John, and we’re going to talk about love.

Before we get to that, a brief story to set the context out of which this sermon emerges.

As many of you know, this past Monday Naomi and I were over at Broadway Church in Vancouver for the convocation ceremony that “officially” marked my graduation from Regent College. Believe it or not, this was the first time I had ever actually *been* to a convocation ceremony of any kind. It was a great time to celebrate with friends and family, to receive a wonderful shiny piece of paper with my name alongside the word “master” (a piece of paper that cost me tens of thousands of dollars!), to parade around in a funny black gown, and to hear a bunch of inspirational speeches from well-meaning fellow students and faculty, and to generally feel pretty good about myself as a human being.

However... both during the ceremony and in the time spent reflecting upon it since—especially in conjunction with the passage of Scripture we’re going to look at in a minute—a few things have stood out to me.

First, there is a *lot* of pomp and ceremony associated with the acquisition of an academic degree. The event took place in a beautifully decorated church, and was interspersed with brilliantly performed musical pieces with cellos, violins, and the piano. Lyrically profound hymns were sung, and people stood when the graduating class proceeded solemnly into the sanctuary.

The professors sit at the front with various robes and hats representing this or that degree from this or that prestigious academic institution. Then we all walked up individual, our degrees were announced, and we received our “academic hoods.” The program listed who accomplished what, who wrote on what topic, etc, etc. There were clear categories to separate who did what and how well.

All in all there was an atmosphere of formality and prestige associated with graduation that I expected but was also bit unprepared for having been out of the academic environment for almost a year now.

The second thing I noticed is that I really enjoyed it. Part of me likes the idea that knowing a bunch of stuff about God and Christianity is recognized and honoured in front of a large group of people.

Most of us were “Masters” now, after all, and why shouldn’t everyone show their appreciation and admiration for our obvious skill and intelligence? Maybe, just maybe, we were now something like “super-Christians”—a small (but noteworthy) cut above the ordinary rank and file who had not ascended to the lofty heights that we now (humbly) occupied.

I’m obviously being sarcastic, but I have to say that it was difficult not to walk away from the convocation ceremony feeling *just a little bit* of pride and superiority. I was now officially a “Master of Christian Studies,” and boy that sure sounded (and felt) important!

But then I sat down on Tuesday and began to work on my sermon for this week. I had decided to preach on the text from the lectionary for this Sunday, and when I sat down I read these words in 1 John 3:11-14:

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.

I want to read a few passages again... “this is the message you have heard from the beginning: We should love one another.”... “Do not be surprised, my brothers and sisters, if the world hates you.”... “We know that we have passed from death to life, because...

...because what?

- We have achieved certain academic degrees?
- We receive the honour of our peers and professors?
- We obtain a piece of paper with the word “Master” on it?

No. *We know that we have passed from death to life because we love each other.*

Well that’s an interesting criterion isn’t it? How do we measure that? What does it mean to “love each other?”

“Love” is a fairly slippery word, after all—it can mean anything from the most passionate romantic love to vague warm and fuzzy feelings, to general approval, to deep emotional attachment and commitment.

Love can mean an awful lot of things to a lot of different people.

This week I got one of those mass circulated emails that contain all kinds of cute children’s sayings. These are not usually high on my list of emails to read, but for some reason I opened it up:

What Love means to a 4-8 year old . . .

'Love is when you go out to eat and give somebody most of your French fries without making them give you any of theirs.' (Chrissy, age 6)

'Love is when Mommy gives Daddy the best piece of chicken.' (Elaine, age 5)

'If you want to learn to love better, you should start with a friend who you hate.' (Nikka - age 6)

'You really shouldn't say 'I love you' unless you mean it. But if you mean it, you should say it a lot. People forget.' (Jessica, age 8)

There’s some good stuff in there!

I also received a wonderful re-write of 1 Corinthians 13 this week that a student in our church wrote for a school project (this is a passage we’ll return to later). Here are a few excerpts:

Love does not gossip about others and enjoy it, but tells others when a good deed is done and rejoices in it. Love protects the mind from negativity at school when false rumours start about you, and trusts friends with top secrets. Love always keeps the mind positive when everything around you seems negative... Love guards the heart so love can last forever.

Again, there is great insight in these words. Love rejoices in good...protects... guards. Sees the positive... Good stuff.

On the other end of the spectrum, I came across an article this week by someone who subjected 1 Cor. 13 to a different kind of scrutiny. What did he come up with? Well the title of his article gives us an idea: *Love is [Expletive] Stupid.*

The author concluded that *nobody* can love like it says in 1 Corinthians 13 and even if they could, they would end up being persecuted, ridiculed, taken advantage of, sneered at, and despised. Love like this is a pitiable display of weakness, and it only leads to manipulation and abuse.” The point the author was trying to make (in a weird and, I think, unnecessarily provocative way), was that this is precisely what happened to the one person who did love perfectly like this: Jesus.

All of these examples demonstrate a simple truth: love is a tough word to pin down. It encompasses a whole range of beliefs, emotions, and actions. The word “love” is a big container that we can put a lot of our own content into.

So what *does* “love” mean in our passage this morning? Well, it turns out that John doesn’t leave us guessing for very long—he answers the question quite succinctly in 3:16-18:

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 one another. 17 If any one of you 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 you? 18 Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth.

It’s almost as if John knows what a malleable word “love” is and so he cuts right to the chase. He doesn’t hold anything back in his answer. The love that is to characterize the Christian—the love that you and I are supposed to display—is defined by what Jesus did at the first Easter.

John is no idealist who is still basking in the glow of the events of Jesus’ triumphal resurrection and ascension. This letter was written around half a century after the time of Jesus so people had had a lot of time to think about how to live post-resurrection, about what all this “Jesus business” was really about.

Reality has set in; the ordinary details of life have taken over; perhaps Jesus’ followers are coming to realize that he isn’t coming back right away and that their task is to learn how to follow him faithfully in his absence. A half-century is a lot of time to think about how Jesus changes things and what this implies in every day life.

A half-century is also enough time for some strange understandings of Jesus to creep into a community. There were some false teachers floating about the community to which John was writing, and it was to address them that he wrote. The main problem was that these teachers denied that Jesus had actually come in the flesh, that he wasn’t a real human being—that he had only appeared human, but was really only a spirit.

Those of you who were here last week will remember James talking about a difficult question brought up in one of our care groups—if Jesus is God and Jesus died, how can God die? Well, the teaching that John is combating here is one way of dealing with this: Jesus wasn't really a flesh-and-blood human being, he just seemed that way. Therefore he didn't really die, it just seemed like he did. John considers this to be a fundamental distortion of the gospel.

John could have simply attacked the ideas of these teachers. John was a pretty sharp guy as were the false teachers he was writing against. Why not just keep the matter at the level of who had the right understanding of Jesus?

Well, ideas *are* important to John—and he does spend time refuting the content of the false teaching in this letter. But for John the ultimate litmus test for anyone who claims to be a follower of Jesus is this: do we love one another?

There are a bunch of Greek words that we translate into English as “love.” But the word for love that Paul uses is probably a fairly well known one: *agape*.

Agape is distinguished from other Greek words for love primarily because of its self-sacrificing quality. It is unconditional love that gives without expectation of anything in return. It is a *fundamentally self-giving love*. It is a *sacrificial* love that seeks the best for and in others, even at great cost to ourselves.

So what does this look like for you and for me? We probably will not be asked to literally lay down our lives to show our love for others. But are we prepared to adopt a fundamentally self-giving posture with respect to those around us? To our friends? Our families? Our colleagues? Our church community? Our children? Our classmates? Our enemies?

Are we prepared to give where there is need? To see what is best in others rather than obsessing about their faults? To see and encourage what God is doing in the lives of those who may not think exactly like we do, rather than measuring everyone around us by the extent to which they are like us? Are we prepared to be wronged—to put others ahead of ourselves even when we're convinced that we are in the right? Are we prepared to go beyond loving with words and to demonstrate our love with actions and in truth as John says?

In a culture that virtually idolizes and enthrones the supremacy of the self, are we prepared to live lives of sacrificial love?

Because *this*, not if we believe the correct list of statements about God, is how the world will know if what we believe about Jesus is true.

In sum: *Christ-like love costs us something and it leads to benefit and blessing for others.*

Earlier, I mentioned 1 Corinthians 13. This is perhaps one of the most beautiful passages in all of Scripture—it's used often at weddings, but I think its significance far transcends the husband/wife relationship. And I think that despite its beauty, it is a frightening passage when we stop to really think about what it says.

I think John would agree with me when I say that this is something like a Christian manifesto that touches every facet of our Christian lives. This is what it means to be a follower of Jesus:

*1 If I speak in human or angelic tongues, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. 2 If I have the gift of prophecy and **can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing.** 3 If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body [to hardship] that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.*

4 Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. 5 It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. 6 Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. 7 It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.

*8 Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; **where there is knowledge** [even knowledge about God, the Bible, Christianity...], **it will pass away.***

13 And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.

If we do not love, we have nothing. We gain nothing. We make a bit of noise for a brief moment of time, but without love it amounts to nothing.

- all the knowledge in the world—all the degrees, the awards, the fancy ceremonies, the robes and hats... *nothing without love*
- the most brilliant charismatic style and ability to communicate... *nothing without love*
- all the social action and worthy causes we get behind... *nothing without love*
- all of the self-discipline we are able to work up... *nothing without love*
- all the money we can make and the prestige we can acquire.... *nothing without love*
- all the faith we can muster... *nothing without love*

Everything we attach significance and worth to, everything we cling to for security and identity will pass away... *but love never fails.*

Love is the greatest thing of all. And it is not an optional component of the Christian life. Love is not just a nice ideal we should aspire to, or something we should at least say we admire. It's not something we should really get around to some day. It's not something for the "super-Christians." It's not for the "Masters."

Love is who we are as followers of Jesus.

I conclude with the words of John, later in his letter:

Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God because God is love.

And later, in 4:12:

No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.

And finally, 4:19-21:

We love because he first loved us. If we say we love God yet hate a brother or sister, we are liars. For if we do not love a fellow believer, whom we have seen, we cannot love God whom we have not seen. And he has given us this command: Those who love God must love one another.

This is our mandate. This is our calling. This is *who we are*. The world is watching and waiting for the sons and daughters of God to love like Jesus loved.

May God help us to be a people who love, not only in word or speech, but in truth and action. By this we will know that we are from the truth. And by this, the watching world will know that God's love is real, that it is within us, and that it is available to all.

Thanks be to God.