

## Love One Another

### 1 John 3:11-18

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Sunday, October 19, 2008

Worship at 9:15 and 11 a.m.

My wife and I have been greatly blessed, week after week, with the wonderful approach to worship—the integration of music and Word. It's a special gift that we enjoy; and I have great, great admiration for our musicians who bring this gift to us, even as we experience it today (the integration of Word and music.) A special "thank you" to Mike Denham, who makes that very possible week after week; and today for Carolann Haley and the bells—that rings true for me. Let us pray. Now, Lord Jesus Christ, may you touch us deeply by your abiding love, that we would have the freedom to love one another in life-giving ways. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen.

There are some chores in our household that neither Vida or myself necessarily like to do. She ends up doing them most of the time, I'm afraid—like taking out the trash, going to the grocery store, cleaning the cat's pan, washing the dishes. But when I occasionally do them, she will often say this to me: "That screams love to me!" As Christians, we are commanded by Jesus to love one another. Twenty times in the New Testament, the simple phrase, "Agape allelous!" – "Love one another!" It is the image of a great banquet that is offered by God to us—for all good things God pours out upon us; and shows us the way for that to happen in the person of Jesus himself. John, in this letter, seeks to give us the clearest Biblical definition of that kind of love; and it is this statement: "We know love by this—that he laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another." My first sermon at National Presbyterian Church four years ago was on John 3:16: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life." Right after that, some did accuse me of sounding more like a Baptist preacher than a Presbyterian—wanting to get people to come to Jesus immediately. I admit that I've been zealous for us to become disciples of following Jesus. Some others along the way have kidded me about being a 'Methodist operative' in the PC(USA) —too much emphasis on responsibility and not enough on God's grace. Well today, I think we have the balance; John 3:16 and 1 John 3:16 together act as that right balance. The two texts seemed appropriate to me as book ends for my ministry among you.

God's preeminent love is seen most clearly in the cosmic act of him giving Jesus to us—to the world. And Jesus laid down his life for us so that we have the freedom to lay down our lives for one another. God makes the first sacrifice. Our choices, then, are freed to make our own sacrifices because of what Jesus has done for each of us. If God can lay down his life for us in Christ, that could give us the encouragement and the support and power to lay down our lives for one another. There is no such thing as godly love that does not sacrifice. We cannot say that we love God or one another unless it costs us something—something of life-rending value: job... time... money... relationships... property. I have a friend who recently gave up a kidney for his daughter, that she might have a longer life. God's sacrificial love for us in Christ moves us to act sacrificially toward one another. It is at the heart of scripture—the guts of the Gospel—this key affirmation: "God is Love!" The ultimate expression of God's love is in Jesus, who willingly suffered and died, at our hands, for our sakes. God gave us Jesus to show us the full extent of love. And because Jesus laid down his life for us, we ought to be able to lay down our lives for one another; sometimes in the simple things like: giving up a seat on the METRO; or allowing another driver into traffic; working extra hours so that your child may have a better education. Sometimes more difficult ways of giving up our preferences in the family so that the church might have a better life; giving ourselves, our time, and our money to do the service of Christ in the church and in the world; or, sometimes, ultimately, dying without leaving behind traces of guilt and shame in the remaining family. The last great sacrificial act of life, in fact, is dying so that others might have a better life.

According to John, the opposite of love is hate. Love gives life and hate takes life away. Hate kills dreams, vision, hope, trust, relationships, and people. While love moves me to sacrifice my life for others, hate drives me to sacrifice others for myself. The Apostle Paul gives us the primal example of the contrast

between love and hate: it is between Cain and Abel. Cain sacrificed his brother Abel for his own purposes. If he had loved Abel, he would have been willing to die for him; but, instead, he killed him. Hate moves one to be a killer rather than a healer—whether it is killing the body or the soul.

In love, there is always a mixture of hope and grief. In our love for one another, there is always that composite of hope and grief. At weddings, we see the hope before the grief; at memorials we see that the grief can precede the hope. But in all of this we know that love implies sacrifice; and in sacrifice there is grief and hope. There is no true expression of the love of God unless something dies. If we say we love one another, we are also saying, at the same time: we are willing to die for one another. Or, we are willing to let something die that we value to prove that love. We are willing to give up something valuable to show that we, in fact, follow Jesus in his love. C. S. Lewis says this about love in his book, *Mere Christianity*:

“Don’t waste time bothering whether you ‘love’ your neighbor; act as if you do... Christian charity is quite distinct from affection. It can lead to affection. The worldly person treats certain kinds of people kindly because she likes them. The Christian, trying to treat everyone kindly, finds himself liking more and more of them, including the people that he could not stand at the beginning...” Love is not a feeling that leads to an act, but an act that might lead to a feeling—but the act must be done. The act of love will take us, sometimes, in the opposite direction of our feelings. I may dislike someone and still choose to lay down my life for them. I may choose to love them even if I don’t feel like it. Jesus called us to pray for and lay down our lives for our enemies. And you have heard Jesus say, “You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy. But I say to you, ‘Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you...’” “Love your enemies and do good to those who hate you...” “If your enemies are hungry, feed them.”

Over the years that I have been here, I’m sure I have made some enemies in the life of this congregation. And this morning, in the sermon, I even made a list of what some of them have said to me; but, I’ve decided not to read that list. It became clear to me that one of the things I need to let go is the list of the things that people have said to me. Because actually, one hundred-to-one, people have said positive things more than negative ones. When I hear such things, I have a choice to make—on the dark side: Do I look for a way to get even? Or... do I find ways to love the people who have decided to dislike me? There is always pain and grief in that decision. Love always seeks to know the truth, even in the midst of the pain—to speak the truth in love and to listen to the truth, in love.

Jesus said to his disciples in the upper room, at that last supper, even to Judas who betrayed him, and Peter who denied him, and the others who deserted him: “I give you a new commandment that you love one another, just as I have loved you.” “By this [pattern] everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.” And right after that he said, “This is my commandment: that you love one another as I have loved you. There is no greater love than this—for one to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.” He loved them; he was willing to lay down his life for them. He loves us, and he has laid down his life for us. Such love... such sacrificial love... is full of forgiveness.

As many of you know, Felix Mendelssohn is a favorite composer of mine. We have some wonderful Mendelssohn music in worship today, for which I give thanks. It was a great love of Mendelssohn’s life that his older sister, Fanny, and he were so close together: every bit his equal in giftedness; his full partner in music and in life. He loved her so much that when Felix was told that she had died pre-maturely, he passed out, himself, in shock. And he never recovered because of the grief... the intense grief that he had for her loss. Their parents had been born to and nurtured in a strict Jewish tradition. However, in Germany at his time, there was a certain ambivalence to those of the Hebrew faith. They decided to raise their own children as Christians. This was done secretly, so as not to hurt the grandparents. One of the grandparents, Madame Salomon, her mother’s mother, was a strong orthodox Jew. She had cursed and cut off her own son for becoming a Christian. And in the presence of this formidable old lady, Fanny was still a favorite of hers. Fanny would often visit her and play for her. One day, after she had played exquisitely well, Fanny was asked a question by Madame Salomon—what she would like to choose to be her reward for playing so well? To the old matron’s great surprise, she replied without a moment’s hesitation: “Forgive Uncle Bartholdy! Forgive him for becoming a Christian.” The request—so earnest and so unexpected—touched the old lady’s heart and eventually brought about reconciliation. And she said, in writing the letter to her son: “For Fanny’s sake, I forgive you.” The old woman was softened by the love of the grand-daughter; love opened the way to forgiveness.

God's sacrificial love always moves us toward forgiveness. We give up our hate; our disdain. And we're called to love those who are our adversaries and enemies. We love those who may betray us. We forgive others as God has forgiven us.

During my pastoral years in Bethlehem, after getting home late on Christmas Eve—into Christmas morning, after our wonderful Christmas Eve services, I would often have a few more presents to wrap into the wee hours of the morning. While doing so, I would watch the midnight mass from St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York City. I particularly enjoyed listening to the homilies of the Archbishop of New York and Cardinal, John O'Connor. At the end of his homily every year, as an affirmation of the love of God, and of his love for the people, he would thank all those that had contributed to his life and the church during the past year. Then, in closing, he would say something like this: "If I have said anything to offend, or done anything to hurt you, I ask for your forgiveness. And I forgive any of you who have spoken evil about, or done harm to me."

I think today is a good day to do that for myself, as well. If you have harmed me, unintentionally or intentionally, I forgive you. If I have hurt you, in word or deed, I ask today for your forgiveness, for this congregation has nurtured the very best of my soul and my ministry life. And I am full of thanksgiving for you. Forgiveness is the practical act of laying down our anger, our rage, our retribution, our need to control, our need to make things right on our terms. There is no greater love than this: for one to lay down what he or she values, for others. Forgiveness is the result of loving sacrifice; and loving sacrifice always leads to forgiveness. "We know this is love—that he laid down his life for us." And we know that when he laid down his life for us, that his shedding of blood led to the forgiveness of our sins.

Do you see another brother or sister at The National Presbyterian Church in need of forgiveness and reconciliation? Do you need to grant forgiveness or ask another for forgiveness? Take the initiative to do it. Make the sacrifice. Venture into the place where few of us are encouraged to go.

In saying "good-bye" I recognize that this statement of Jesus—this teaching— teaches us how to say "good-bye" in ways that show love. Hate, when saying "good-bye," likes to leave the shadows of shame... the ghosts of guilt... and the clouds of retribution... or at a minimum, at least the ambiguity of ambivalence. But if we love one another, we will take the time to say "good-bye"—carefully and prayerfully. Because, in "good-bye" in love, there's always the glimpse of hope for reunion in the future—whether it's on earth or it's in heaven. Love yearns to see another person again. Love does not rest well with the permanent "good-bye;" it just doesn't seem to be Christian. Love takes time to say "good-bye." Love does not allow us to sneak off in the dark of night. Love confronts the pain of departure; because in facing the grief of loss, we enter the hope of a future life together. Love always anticipates a future in every "good-bye." The wounded-ness of Washington, DC may tempt you to say, "Good riddance;" or as others might say, "So long." But the love of God constrains us to say "good-bye" with grief, and with anticipation of seeing one another again. It's time for us, as the beloved people of God, to lay down our lives for one another—to show Washington, DC that our love has action. And when the city sees the forgiveness and the reconciliation of life between us as a congregation, let them say, "That screams love to us!"

Let us pray. Now, Lord Jesus Christ, with your Word, by the power of your Holy Spirit, may you guide us into the freedom and the commitment to love one another as you have loved us. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.