

Pastor Joe Polzin
1 John 4:7-16
“Transformed by Love”
Year A – Stewards Transformed: Week Three
July 23, 2017

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

The characteristic that defines a Christian... The requirement that Jesus sets for his disciples, and all who would follow him... is love. When a lawyer tested Jesus, asking him the greatest commandment, Jesus responded, “You shall *love* the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind... And a second is like it: You shall *love* your neighbor as yourself” (Matt. 22:36-39).

And Jesus said to his disciples, “A new commandment I give to you, that you *love* one another... By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:34-35). He could have chosen any characteristic in the world to define his followers. Courage. Wisdom. Perseverance. Faithfulness. Any of these might have defined who a Christian is. But the one, he says, above all else, is love.

Love is what motivates God’s relationship with us, and is to be what motivates our relationships with others. But sometimes we hear Jesus talk about love, and I think our reaction is no different than when we hear a popular song lyric on the radio, “All you need is love...” or “Love makes the world go ‘round...” It’s something that sounds nice, but has no real effect at the end of the day.

And the reason we may be tempted to allow these words of our Lord to go right on by us, to deflect off the armor that we’ve set up to keep our lives comfortable, is because we know these words are a challenge to how we choose to live our lives at times. If we were to stop and consider our own actions in light of Jesus’ command to love, we would then be challenged to consider if people truly know us as Christ’s disciples *by* our love.

Are our actions throughout the day motivated by a constant consideration of what’s the best thing we could do right now for our neighbor, for our spouse, for our friend, for our family? Are we so motivated by love that we jump at the chance to serve others, without first thinking of what it’s going to cost our own energy, time, or money? Do we mean what we say at the end of every worship service here, “We go to share God’s love,” looking for all the opportunities in the upcoming week to do just that?

And in our relationship with God, do we love Him with all our heart, soul, and mind? Everything we think, say, and do? Is it obvious to others that God comes first in our lives by how we prioritize our actions, our time, even our attitude toward our possessions and money? Are we using God’s gifts to properly honor and worship Him, and to help us fulfill the commandment to love one another?

As well as we think we do *sometimes*, we all fall short of this standard to love *at all times*. And instead of letting ourselves be convicted by God’s Word so that we might repent and be changed, too often we consider what God has to say about love as something pleasant to hear, but just as easy to turn off and ignore as a song on the radio.

Our Epistle Reading, 1 John chapter 4, echoes Jesus’ command to love. John writes, “Beloved, let us love one another.” But that’s not all John has to say, because he roots the encouragement for us to love in the reason and source of our love, in God Himself. “Let us love

one another,” John says, “for love is from God” (4:1). In other words, we couldn’t love if we had not received love from God first.

And *how* did God show love to us? Not in generalities. Not in warm feelings God sends our way. Not in a whimsical wish of love that may or may not happen, depending on if God felt like getting around to it in His otherwise busy week. No, God’s love was definitively demonstrated to us, manifested, John says, by God choosing to send His Son, Jesus Christ.

“In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation[, the payment,] for our sins” (4:10-11).

When we otherwise were not only failing to love God, but as Scripture says, when we were His enemies, because of our sinful nature, and our sins we commit day in and day out... When we were failing to love our God with all our heart, soul, and mind... When we were failing to love others *at least* as well as we love ourselves...

When we were failing to love... God loved us. Not because we deserved it, but because He knew what we needed most was His love, manifested by His choice to send the Savior to this world, His choice to send the one who gives us the assurance of eternal life, Jesus Christ.

“Beloved,” John writes to his flock, “if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.” John’s not saying we must love to show ourselves worthy of God. We don’t love others to earn God’s love. We love one another because when you’ve been given a gift as great as the love we’ve freely received through Jesus, it cannot help but transform our lives. Through the grace that’s been shown us, through the faith that’s been given so that we may believe, through the love that impacts everything in our lives, we *are* transformed, in what we think, say, and do. So, we use this life that God has given us, stewarding it, so that our main goal, our main objective, the reason why we’re here, is to love.

In 1 Chronicles chapter 29, King David and all of Israel demonstrated by their offerings their love of God. David very deeply wanted to build a magnificent house of worship, worthy enough to honor God. But God informed him it would be his son, Solomon, not David, who would build the temple in Jerusalem. And yet, that did not stop David from doing all he could to gather the finest materials so that Solomon would be prepared to one day complete the project.

And what really stands out in King David’s prayer in the presence of the assembly of Israel, which is what we heard in our Old Testament reading, is his humble attitude about this offering that was just made to God. David could have been bitter, not being able to construct the temple himself before his death. Or he even could have been proud of all that he did to pave the way for Solomon. Instead, listen to what David says to God:

“But who am I, and what is my people, that we should be able thus to offer willingly? For all things come from you, and of your own have we given you” (29:14). David and his people recognized that they were only able to make an offering to God because God had first given all things to them.

In his prayer, David recognizes that, before God, humans beings are nothing, our “days are like a shadow” (29:15). Yet God has graciously provided us life, salvation, and love. And we respond with our love for God. The verse right before David begins his prayer, it says, “The people rejoiced because they had given willingly, for with a whole heart they had offered freely to the Lord” (29:9).

When was the last time we rejoiced because we were privileged enough to be able to give to God an offering of our time, of our skills and abilities, or of our finances? When was the last

time we were so filled with joy because we were given an opportunity to make a sacrifice of ourselves, our time, our abilities, our money to help serve someone around us?

But this is the attitude God's love empowers us to have. Because God helps us see, unless we were *first* given His love, we would *never* have been able to love in return. Unless we were *first* given His love, we would never have been able to love one another. God gives us all our time, talent, and treasure that we have in our lives. He gives us our very life itself. And only after we've received all He's given us, do we have the privilege to be His stewards, and the privilege of our purpose to love.

How would our offerings that we give on Sundays look if we viewed it like David, a joy that we were even able to give freely willingly, something to God who has so greatly loved us? How would our commitment of our time as a part of this congregation, in Sunday worship, in Bible Study, in fellowship, in our various community outreach projects, how would that look, motivated by the love that we have received, and the love that we seek to share? How would my household look if everyone's commitment, every choice made throughout the day, was first and foremost to love?

The life of a Christian steward does not live a life turned in on itself. The life of a Christian steward is lived first turned upward toward heaven, from where we receive everything in thanksgiving, and second turned outward toward others, where everything we have ought to go.

Right before Jesus told his disciples, "A new commandment I give to you, that you *love* one another," he had just finished saying, "Where I am going you cannot come" (John 13:33). And he said this because he was in the Upper Room with his disciples, on the same night he would be betrayed, arrested, beaten, and crucified. Jesus was heading to the cross to make the truly perfect and holy sacrifice for all our sin. The disciples couldn't follow him, because this was something only he could do. And there he offered himself for them, and for us, for you and for me.

And by this act of going to the cross, Jesus demonstrated the very love that we could not produce in and of ourselves. He manifested the love that God chose to give us freely, which transforms us entirely. He showed us the love that as Christians, we are to steward and share by using every possible means God provides for us to do so.

This may be the end of our series on stewardship, but this is not the end of our lives as stewards. Perhaps, for many of you, this is a new beginning. I pray that you all have come to know more fully the God who has given us His very precious gifts of grace, faith, and love, all through His one perfect gift, Jesus Christ. And that in response to His great gifts, we live faithfully as stewards, as managers, of God's creation, our lives, and all with which He blesses us.

And as we grow in our stewardship, I pray that [Trinity/Mt. Hope] Lutheran Church will be known by our love. The love we have for God, the love we have for one another, and the love we have for our community, as we make the love of God known to all.

I pray that we are able to rejoice and praise our God, as we offer ourselves willing to Him, knowing that we give Him only that which He's given us.

And finally, I pray that each of you know the great love He has for you, that He has given you nothing less than His very Son, Jesus Christ, so that you would have life in his name. Amen.

And now may the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.