

What Love Is  
Fourth Sunday of Easter - Year B - 04/25/2021  
Psalm Reading: 23  
1<sup>st</sup> Reading: John 10:11-18, 2<sup>nd</sup>: 1 John 3:14-24

I can remember, back in the 60s, there was a book featuring the Charles Schultz Peanuts cartoon character, Snoopy. Snoopy is snuggled up against Lucy Van Pelt and the caption reads, “Happiness is a warm puppy”. The other day, when I was researching this sermon, I actually remembered the title as “Love is a warm puppy.” ...probably because I was under the influence of today’s reading from 1 John, but also because I think there is a connection between love and happiness, and maybe warm puppies, too.

In our reading John writes in chapter 3, verse 16, “This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us.” This gives us the fundamental definition for what love is: the willingness to give up our lives for the sake of someone else, in effect: realizing that there is something or someone more important than the self. That Jesus, the perfect being, was willing to suffer and die for all humanity shows the value he put on our lives above even his own.

In John’s letter, the Apostle, or Elder as he is often referred to, is trying to illustrate just how much God loves us. Thus he speaks in terms of how much Christ was willing to freely sacrifice to save us. And I think we all have our own way of measuring love for ourselves. For example, we might think of our own love for a spouse, or a parent, or a child as being wider than the largest ocean, higher than the highest mountain. (That

puts me in mind of a Marvin Gaye hit from the 1960s. Roger Miller, who was one of my favorite country singers because of his off the wall lyrics put it this way, “Thunder rollin’, lightnin’ flashin’, right through the middle of it I’d go dashin’, goes to show all I’d go through for you, if ya want me to.” (Boy am I dating myself with these references, but remember I was just a young boy at the time.)

But you know, all the songs over the eons about love, all the stories of sacrifice in literature, though I think they touch upon the capacity of the human heart, they do not reach to the deliberate sacrifice that Christ made. One can barely imagine this individual, fully human, fully divine, taking on such suffering for the sake of we imperfect beings. We are full of sin, full of ourselves, so much so that we have trouble imagining ourselves taking up the cross, of making sacrifices for the good of others. But as Christians, that is exactly what we are called upon to do in the second sentence of verse 16 John writes, “We ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters.”

Now we can take this ominous statement as hyperbole, and simply pass it by as we roll on to succeeding verses, or we can feel its full impact by dwelling on its content. John is saying that we should be willing to literally die for our fellow human, whether we have a personal relationship with them or not. Well, should that become necessary. Interestingly, it is hard to think of examples, even in the Bible where such a heroic sacrifice was made. Even a figure so great as Abraham was willing to sacrifice his own son Isaac, not himself, simply to

please God. There is only one figure that stands out on such a level, and that is the hero of our own lives<sup>1</sup>, Jesus Christ.

And Jesus did so with forethought. It was not one of those spur of the moment things where Jesus leaps in front of a speeding bullet to save our lives. No doubt Jesus would do that too. Instead, in the year 30 or so, Jesus went to the cross to save us for our sins, and Jesus knew exactly what he was doing when he did it, and knew that it meant, not merely death, but considerable suffering before release would come.

In verse 18 John goes on to say, “Let us not love with words or speech, but with actions and truth.” Actions! My friends, not hollow words. It is easy enough to say that there is no ocean wide enough...or that you would run through hurricane force winds blowing grief and sorrow for someone. In fact you might even mean it with all your heart when you say it. But as has been noted probably billions of times, “the proof is in the pudding.” The physical act demonstrates that the words actually have meaning.

When I came here to Alpena I was told that we have a mission statement to the effect that we Proclaim the Word, Nurture God’s people, and Demonstrate God’s love. I can’t tell you how often these words pop up in one of my sermons, or into my mind when I am in Bible Study, or simply praying in the morning. And I always seem to be finding deeper meaning associated with them. When we talk about *proclaiming* the Word, we do this out of love of God, but the words are empty unless we also attempt to live by them and this we do when we *nurture* and *demonstrate*. We, in essence, proclaim God’s love

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1. Almost inadvertent ref to David Copperfield, in case you did not notice.

as a church, and demonstrate that love to our members and to the world.

There is a theological term for this, and it is “praxis”. It is basically our action, based on our faith, applied to the world. Now reading John’s first letter I am coming to the conclusion that praxis, as a theological term, is what love is. God practices love on us, and in response we practice God’s love on humanity.

Now, let’s look at that verse again. John wrote, “Let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth.” We talked about action, but we have not yet discussed truth. What about this “in truth” thing? Well, John explains it in the next couple of verses. He says:

“This is how we know that we belong to the truth and how we set our hearts at rest in his presence: If our hearts condemn us, we know that God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything. Dear friends, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have confidence before God.” (v.19-21)

John is telling us that we may be guided by the feeling we have inside of us when we act. If our actions are subversive or self-serving, then we will know it. If we are acting out of fear, then we will know it. But on the other side, if we act boldly out of love, we will know it through the Spirit. This is what John says in the last verse of the chapter. (v.24)

Maybe, just maybe, that feeling that we get inside, the Spirit confirming what we do is right, is also love. A swelling within us that overwhelms all of our selfish thoughts and desires to finally build us up to be something better than simply our animal natures, making us something more, something,

revealing in us, and to the world, the image of God in which we were made.

Now, I want to address the idea of us laying down our lives in the manner that Jesus laid down His life for us. Christ made the ultimate sacrifice for us. And if we live our lives in imitation of Christ we should be willing to do the same. Yet it will not be often that we are asked to make this kind of sacrifice for others. I think that we need to view this in another light. Not in the light of a total sacrifice all at once, but a gentle sacrifice of our time, talent, and treasure over the course of our lives.

In fact, when we dedicate our lives to Christ it can be far more valuable to the church and to society than one grand gesture might be. We can show our love daily, over a long life, organizing pot lucks, reading liturgies, serving on Session boards, visiting shut ins, teaching Sunday school, praying for friends at church, getting involved with missions, serving with others, and for others, in so many ways.

I think, in a sense, this thing we call love makes sacrifice not so much a pain, or cost, but rather it accrues to us a joy greater than any other gain we may attain...it fills us with love. So, we act in response to God's love for us. We think we sacrifice ourselves out of love, but at the end of it all we have gained far more than we ever spent because of our sacrifice.

So what is love? Is it a warm puppy? Well, I suppose it could be, looking after God's creatures, humanity's best friend, certainly is an act of love. But is love equivalent with happiness? You know, I think it is not exactly the same thing, but I think love produces happiness. When we act out of love, when we sacrifice for others we are filled with the Spirit, and

the Spirit may calm us, It may excite us. It may prompt us to further action. But in all of these I think we gain a sense of satisfaction, a sense of belonging, and sense of drawing near to God, all of which engender happiness within us.

And you know, you do not have to practice love on those you do know, you can practice love on anyone. There is a peanut cartoon where Snoopy is sitting on the roof of his dog house with a typewriter tapping out a message. It reads, "Dear (Blank) I miss you more each day. I miss you more than words can say." Charlie Brown looks at the typed page and asks, "That's nice, but who are you writing to?" (Who is being addressed in the blank?) In a thought bubble over Snoopy's head we can see his thoughts, "I can always fill that in later."

On a practical level, we can do the same, we can act out of love right now, even to people we do not even know. Some might call that a random act of kindness, filling the name in later.

We know that God loves us because of the infinite sacrifice of Jesus on the cross. As disciples and out of gratitude we respond by making our own sacrifices, and this is how we show love. Love begets more love, just as violence begets violence. So my friends, let us practice love.

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