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First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida  
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### 1 John 3:16-24 (NRSV)

We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us--and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. [17] How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help?

[18] Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action. [19] And by this we will know that we are from the truth and will reassure our hearts before him [20] whenever our hearts condemn us; for God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything.

[21] Beloved, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have boldness before God; [22] and we receive from him whatever we ask, because we obey his commandments and do what pleases him.

[23] And 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.

[24] All 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.

### ALL YOU NEED IS LOVE

Several years ago a popular rock star sang, "All you need is love." It sounded so easy. Falling in love was like falling off a log. Anyone could do it.

But, love is anything but easy when Christians talk about it.

Whenever Christians use the word love, they also use the word sacrifice. Love is defined by the sacrifice of God's Son, Jesus Christ who (according to John) "laid down his life for us." (1 John 3:16) And we are encouraged to follow in his footsteps. As Jesus laid down his life for us, we are encouraged to "lay down our lives for one another."

All you need is love. But, love is not easy. In fact love as defined by the Christian faith sometimes seems all but impossible.

## LOVE YOUR ENEMIES

Elsewhere we are commanded to love our enemies. So, it stands to reason that when the Bible tells us to lay down our lives for one another that “one another” includes not only our best friends and family but also our enemies.

We have no choice; we are commanded to love. Our passage for today tells us that we “ought to lay down our lives for one another.”

## GOOD FENCES?

Again I am struck by how the Christian message is so different from what most people in our society believe.

We live a world where people are desperately trying to keep their life from danger; we live in a society where people are desperately trying to keep their neighbor at arm’s length.

We live by the motto “good fences make good neighbors.”

That’s not only true of the people who live next door but also of the people who live in the countries that are near us.

We do not want to put our “way of life” at risk. We want to close the borders of our country, and we want to close the borders of our life.

When confronted with the needs of our neighbor, our solution has often been to build bigger fences.

## BREAKING DOWN BARRIERS

But, the ministry of Jesus was all about breaking down those barriers. He (contrary to the custom of the day) spoke to and showed compassion toward women and children. He touched the lepers, and he offered forgiveness to those who were thought to be beyond redemption.

The compassion of Christ brought hope to many, and his compassion knew no boundaries. Jesus often crossed over into Gentile country and offered healing and salvation to those beyond the border. Jesus talked and ate with those that were despised by the rich and powerful.

His compassion made him a popular man with all the wrong people. The crowds demonstrated in the streets as he came into Jerusalem. They walked off their jobs and waved palm branches as some might wave a flag.

And that made him a dangerous man.

In the end, they crucified Jesus for his compassion.

Jesus was lifting up people who had formerly been without a voice.

And the religious and political leaders were not about to allow such a thing to happen.

## A PORTRAIT OF LOVE

Now Jesus knew that his trip into Jerusalem would bring trouble. In fact Jesus repeatedly told his disciples that his passion and crucifixion were inevitable.

But, Jesus was willing to put himself at risk for the people he came to save. Jesus courageously and willingly sacrificed his life, and from the cross he asked that his enemies be forgiven.

According to John's first letter, if you want to draw a portrait of love, it will always take the shape of a cross.

And those who want to follow Jesus must take up a cross in order to follow him.

Faith and love are defined by sacrifice.

## TAKING UP A CROSS

Down through the ages some Christians have taken these lines literally. They have courageously given up their lives for the sake of their brothers and sisters and for the faith.

But, most of the time our sacrifices are of a less dramatic nature.

The love and sacrifice of Christ compels us to share what we have with those who are needy.

The love and sacrifice of Christ compel us to show compassion on those whose life is in disarray.

The love and sacrifice of Christ compel us to forgive those who sin against us.

And if we do not show compassion toward those little ones, John asks, “How can God’s love abide in us?” (1 John 3:17) If our lives are not in some way a copy of our Master’s life, how can we say that we are his disciples?

Jesus summarized the faith by saying that we should love God and our neighbor as we love ourselves. Those two commandments go together. Loving God and loving neighbor are two parts of a single equation.

John goes on to say a little later in his first letter, “If someone says, ‘I love God,’ and hates his brother, he is a liar; for the one who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen ... the one who loves God should love his brother also.”

## PEOPLE WHO ARE HARD TO LOVE

Now this all sounds fine and dandy until we start to consider some of the neighbors and brothers that we are commanded to love.

Think about that person who betrayed your trust, the person who cheated you, or the person who broke your heart. You know who they are. Each of us knows a person who fits that description ... or even worse.

Now, think about the Bible’s command to love not just any person but that person. All you need is love, right? Well, it’s not so easy when it comes to

actually loving an actual person . . . much less a person who has wronged us in some way.

In fact to hear some people tell it all we need is not love but a good grudge.

There is something about us that enjoys resurrecting the old hurts. We talk about them to other people. In loving detail we go over the specific ways that they have offended us.

A preacher told about a guy in college who kept a framed picture of a young man. The young man in the picture went to another college and according to the student; he had “stolen” his girlfriend.

Beside this framed picture the college student kept three darts, and he invited anyone who entered the room to use his “special” dart board.

We may not have a dart board with a framed photograph of our enemy. But, many of us nurse grudges in much the same way. We harbor resentment against the one who prevented us from getting that dream job. We hold a grudge against the one who slandered our good name in public.

Now we could understand if John commanded us to “live with each other despite our differences.”

We could understand if John had commanded us to “let bygones be bygones.”

We could understand if John said, “Don’t hold on to your anger and resentment. It’s bad for your health.”

That would be good advice.

But, John says more than that. John commands us to, “Love one another.” How in the world can we do that? Another popular song put it this way, “We’ve lost that loving feeling now it’s gone, gone, gone.”

When it comes to those who have wronged us this is especially true. Don’t talk to me about love. I can’t control my feelings.

Let me make a dart board. I don't get mad. I get even! I don't want mercy. I want justice.

## LOVE IS A DECISION

And yet the Bible consistently tells us the opposite of what we want to believe. The Bible tells us the opposite of what seems normal and natural. The Bible tells us to love our enemies.

We begin to understand that love as the Bible uses the word is not so much a feeling but a decision. Love as the Bible talks about it is a matter of determination.

How can this be?

How can such super-human love be possible?

## LOVE ON THE CROSS

It is possible because of the love we see on the cross. When we understand what God in Christ has already done for us, we are prepared to love others, even our enemies out of gratitude and faith.

As most of you know there's even a special word for this biblical kind of love, God's love. It is called *agape*, and it is not based upon what we do. It is based upon what God has already done for us in Christ Jesus.

The Bible tells us that all of us were once enemies of God. Our sinful ways alienated us from God and His glory. And yet, *while we still sinners* Christ died for us. (Romans 5:8)

That is a portrait of God's love for us. His love is illustrated by the cross. He gives his life for us with no preconditions and no strings attached.

This apostle Paul asked, "If this is what God is like, won't this God give us everything else that we need in life? Can't we trust God with our life and the lives of those around us?" (Romans 8:32)

Someone sent me an e mail this past week with pity Christian sayings. One I liked particularly well. It said, "God doesn't grade on the curve. God grades on the cross."

If only we could understand and act upon the truth of that statement. The Bible tells us that God didn't send his son into the world to condemn the world but that the world through him might be saved.

## PRODIGAL LOVE

There's only one thing that can keep us from that love; it is our own refusal to love our brother or sister.

Remember the story of the prodigal son? The younger brother goes to Las Vegas and gambles away his portion of the family fortune. Eventually he returns home and asks to be a servant in his father's house. And what happens? The younger brother is welcomed back not as a servant but as a son. They throw a big party and everyone celebrates.

Well, almost everyone celebrates. The older brother is not so happy. He thinks that the younger brother is being spoiled by his indulgent old man. And he won't join the party.

What the older brother never understood was that everything that he had was also due to the grace of his father. His father loved him just as much and had forgiven him in many ways as well.

But, the older brother's resentment toward his younger brother kept him from joining the party. The older brother thought that he was better than his younger brother and that made him bitter.

I see many people in the church today who have the same problem. They are bitter toward others because they have not completely understood how much God has forgiven them. They are constantly worried about the sins of the younger brother or the younger sister, and they are very dissatisfied with themselves and with everyone else.

They turn away from the offer to join the party. They turn away from the grace of God.

If we refuse to be gracious toward others, how can we embrace the grace of God as revealed in Jesus Christ? If we cannot be compassionate toward others, how can we talk about the love of God? (1 John 3:17)

## YOUR CHEATING HEART

I have noticed that quite often the most critical and bitter people are bogged down with a load of guilt. As John put it, their hearts condemn them or as Hank Williams put it, “Your cheating heart will tell on you.”

They know in their heart of hearts that they are not the people they should be, but instead of dealing with that, instead of changing their behavior in some way, they bitterly point the finger of blame toward someone else.

An interesting phenomenon sometimes takes place when counseling is successful. One person in a family is identified as the person with a problem.

When this person arrives for counseling you see that he does indeed have a problem so you devise a treatment plan, and after a while his behavior improves. But, the family falls apart!

The family was able to function because all of their problems, all of their sins were blamed on this one family member who was “ill.” But, when they no longer are able to put the blame on this black sheep in the family, they have psychological problems.

I think that sometimes people in the church operate on this principle. Instead of trying to understand the depth of God’s grace in Jesus Christ, we sometimes focus on the sinfulness of certain groups of people. We can say to ourselves, “At least I’m not as bad as that son or daughter who is wasting their inheritance in the casinos of Vegas.”

This may work for a while, but there will come a time when we will have to face the dark spot in our own life. There will come the time when our hearts

will condemn us, and we will have to face the facts of our own sinfulness. (1 John 3:19-20)

What do we do then? What do we do when the prodigal comes home, and we find ourselves shut out of the party?

## GOD IS GREATER THAN OUR CONSCIENCE

John tells us not to focus so much on what we feel but upon what God has said and revealed to us in Jesus Christ. If we have a bad conscience, we need to remember that God is greater than our conscience.

We can boldly go into God's presence because God is love. God does not hold back anything from us. In Jesus Christ we are forgiven. We just need to come back home.

The portrait of love painted on the cross is for us, personally.

Today we once again remember what Jesus told his disciples. On the same night that he was betrayed he instituted a supper, a sacrament based upon love.

Jesus said, "This sacrifice is for you. This is my body broken for you. This is my blood shed for you. This is a picture of just how much I love you."

God loves us with no strings attached.

God gives us everything He has and invites us to join in the party.

Don't stand outside in the cold.

Come on in and join the feast of forgiveness and life eternal. People are coming to celebrate from all over the world. Let's welcome them as God in Christ welcomes us to the feast that he has prepared.

Amen.

**FIRST PRESBYTERIAN**