

Love Is Something You Do
John 3:14-21
Preached by Rev Dr. Harry Cahill
Babcock Presbyterian Church
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The British New Testament scholar William Barclay taught “Love is something you do.” That is, love is much more than just feeling compassion or empathy, love is doing something about it.

This makes sense when you consider Jesus’ teaching, “For God so loved the world that he sent his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.”

God so loved the world, he did something about it. He sent his only son. Love is something you do.

I think it was Rick Warren who suggested I John 3:16-17 compliments John 3:16. “We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. 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 to help?”

Love IS something you do in response to God’s love for us. In this case the buck doesn’t stop here. You are expected to pass it on. Otherwise your love misses the mark.

As the current recession shapes up we’ll be hearing more about friends, relatives and co-workers being laid off or anticipating a pink slip. Many people, especially the young, are experiencing financial insecurity for the first time. Now more than ever God’s people are faced with the challenge to do something tangible to support our neighbors and friends because love is something you do.

Last Sunday’s sermon reminded us the Ten Commandments are God’s rules governing our life together in human society. The first four commandments address our primary obligations to God, the last six set the standard for the minimum requirements of our obligations to each other. But Jesus’ summation of the Ten Commandments “love God, love your neighbor and love yourself” exhorts us to go beyond the minimum requirements. It’s not just about doing no harm it’s all about doing good. Love is something you do.

Even though John 3:16 (For God so loved the world) is the centerpiece of this morning’s scripture we can’t ignore that curious verse immediately preceding it. “And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.” (John 3:15)

What’s that all about? It’s one of the stories from the Hebrews’ forty years of wandering in the wilderness. Like Jesus’ forty days in the wilderness, their’s was a time of testing and purgation. The Jews had to lose their slave mentality and then claim their new identity as God’s chosen people, which was no easy task. The old lifestyle had to be unlearned and then replaced with the primary desire to trust God. It was hard going and they complained loudly. “Why can’t we just go straight home to the Promised Land, why all this wandering and testing?” We can empathize with their grumbling, because we do it too. We wonder why we have to wait, not realizing without any trials and tribulations

to overcome we'd never be ready to face down the inevitable challenges that always comes.

The story of Moses lifting up the serpent in the wilderness was one of those teaching moments the Jews needed to experience. After suddenly being inundated by a plague of poisonous snakes, the Jews momentarily stopped carping and started praying. In answer to their prayers, God instructed Moses to raise up a bronze serpent, promising everyone bitten who looked up at it would be healed.

Jesus used this story of the bronze serpent being lifted up and becoming healing balm for snake poisoning as a metaphor for himself being lifted up on the cross as the antidote for the sins of the world. Why would Jesus allow this to happen? Because God so loved the world and love is something you do.

Of course, the antidote is universally available, but it only works for those "who believe in him." But understand, believing in Jesus means following Jesus. Saying, "Yeah, I believe all that stuff in the Bible" is a far cry from being willing to bet your life on it too. Love is something you do.

One of the unfortunate consequences of modern day evangelism is the notion that just saying "Jesus is Lord" means you're off the hook. But didn't Jesus warn many who say "Lord, Lord" are not fit for God's Kingdom? Apparently God requires more. Believing "all that stuff" is only the first step. Trusting "all that stuff" is the second step. The third step, Living "all that stuff" is what determines whether or not the first two steps were heartfelt and genuine. Love is something you do.

Consider this: a wealthy American Christian who goes to church every Sunday is moved to tears when he sings his favorite hymn and hears a moving sermon. But on the way home he always turns a blind eye to human suffering; he never feeds the hungry, welcomes the stranger or visits the sick. But since he's "born again" he thinks he's right with God. He has time for work and pleasure, but when asked to do something significant for the least of these his excuses come fast and furious.

O.K. Maybe our wealthy American Christian is an obvious straw man. He sounds too bad to be true, a one dimensional cartoon, certainly not like any of us. And yet, our "born again" friend is the perfect poster boy for the warning, "Don't let this happen to you!"

By the way, speaking of being born again, did you realize this morning's passage is really the continuation of a conversation Jesus was having with Nicodemus, the Pharisee who secretly came to Jesus in the middle of the night? Nicodemus didn't come to debate or trap Jesus with trick questions. He had too much integrity for that. He came seeking truth. This highly respected religious scholar, probably old enough to be his father, came to Jesus because he realized his faith and practice was wanting and needed to go to the next level.

Jesus told him he must be "born again," he needed a radical re-orientation away from everything he believes. Everything must change, nothing's sacred! God not only wanted to turn his life around, he wanted to turn him inside out.

Nothing is said about Nicodemus' immediate reaction to Jesus' declaration, "You must be born again," until early in Jesus' ministry John reports Nicodemus risked everything to defend Jesus from being attacked and later, following the crucifixion he again risked everything by assisting Joseph of Arimathea prepare Jesus' body for burial.

Love is something you do. Specifically, love is something you do for someone who can never pay you back.

Most of us live relatively sheltered lives. It's so easy to go to work, return home, say your prayers (when we remember) and go to bed, only to get up the next morning and repeat the cycle. But really being "born again" means becoming increasingly aware of your neighbors' needs and sufferings and then becoming attentive to people's moods, not so you know when to avoid them, but to know how best to connect with them. By making yourself available to listen to their stories and, if invited, to enter into their suffering, you fulfill the law of Christ. Love is something you do.

Today we're just past the midpoint of Lent, and our own wilderness wanderings. I said earlier the wilderness is the place of testing and purgation. You allow God to test your will and allow yourself to be purged of any habit or desire keeping you from abandoning yourself completely to God. Certainly that's the ideal none of us ever live up to. Unlike Jesus, we give in to temptation, like the Jews, we complain and rebel, and yet because God so loved the world, grace emerges from our messy attempts to get it right.

We tend to forget Lent is not only the season to give up something, but to take on something, not just a time to deny yourself your favorite guilty pleasure, but especially a time to deny yourself and do something significant for someone who can never pay you back.

For Christ's sake, find a way to feed the hungry, comfort the troubled, visit the sick and the prisoner. Make your life count for something. Just don't believe, follow Jesus in the servant lifestyle, because love is something you do.