



Called to Love

MISSION SUNDAY | 1 JOHN 3:16-24

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Reading or watching the news has become an exercise in courage these days, or perhaps a test of one's inner calm.

On Wednesday morning this past week, when I opened up cbcnews.ca to see what was happening in the world, the headlines were as discouraging as usual: a top Canadian doctor who couldn't admit to being wrong about something; daily COVID cases surging into the hundreds of thousands in India; another fatal shooting in the US...arguments over how our precious supply of vaccines are being distributed; a tense court case about access to public lakes in BC. Pick another day, and I imagine the news would be headlined by similarly unpleasant stories.

Without commenting on the issues themselves, it seems that what drives a lot of the events of our communities and our world these days are things like pride and power, fear and self-interest. As Christians, we remember that Jesus taught us to love others as we do ourselves. Looking at the world around us today calls the relevancy of Scripture, of that teaching in particular, into question. Love one another seems to have disappeared entirely in favour of personal power and ego, divisiveness and disagreement; setting boundaries and drawing uncrossable lines among people, rather than coming together in love.

Our Gospel reading this morning encourages us to love not with words or speech but with actions and in truth. I wonder what that looks like today, loving in action and truth. I wonder, too, sometimes, if it's just us – the generations of Christians living today – that struggle to figure out what it means to love in a world that seems so full of hate and fear, a world that would likely prefer us to remain quiet and unobtrusive when it comes to our faith. We hope that there must be way to overcome hate and fear with Christ's love and peace, a way for Christian love to be vital and active in our communities and in the world.

But how are we supposed to live the Gospel in a world that seems to always be pushing back against it?

This morning's Scripture comes from the first of three letters written by John, found together near the end of the New Testament. There is a connection between these letters and the Gospel of John, though whether they were written by the same person or simply came from a John-planted Christian community is unknown. The most intriguing thing about these letters, though, is that we don't know very much about who they were written to – 2 John was to a woman, the elect lady, and 3 John to Gaius. But 1 John – the longest and most elaborate of the three – is not clearly addressed to any specific person or church. There are only a few hints within it about who it was written to and why. When we look at some of the other New Testament letters, like Galatians, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Philippians, or Romans, we find a lot of information about the who and the why. Each letter was addressed to a specific church community going through a specific set of issues or answering specific questions about practice and belief.

But not so with 1 John; what little we can unearth about the reasons for this letter refers to false prophets, breakaway groups who had beliefs and practices that sounded vaguely Christian and quite spiritual, but were getting it entirely wrong. We also know that Christians were very much in the minority at this time, in whatever city or town they lived in, smaller communities within communities. At less than century old, this new religious movement was growing but still small, and without the kind of government respect that the much older Judaism received or the government sanction of the Roman religion.

So Christians at this time were struggling with internal conflict about these new Christian-looking groups and what they believed and whether it was better or more correct than their own beliefs, and they were a minority religious movement within a much larger, not terribly supportive, society. These are familiar circumstances for a lot of Christian churches, in many places and at different times during our shared history. John's letter speaks to that uncertainty and to the struggle to live the Gospel together in a world that, like our own, seems to always push back against it. And he does it by reflecting deeply on the Gospel message, bringing it into dialogue, into the discussion people are already having about belief, practice and witness, and trying to work out what the Gospel means for the church in that time and place.

Scripture doesn't get much more relevant than that! Because that's what we do every week around here, isn't it?

In worship on Sunday morning, in our Bible studies, at our Session meetings and when we can have them, all our other team meetings, WMS gatherings, mission projects, food and clothing drives, carol sings and cantatas, and everything else we do together, too. In our worship and our work, we ought always to be expressing our understanding of the Gospel, for this time and in this place. And that is exactly what the early churches under John's leadership sought to do, too.

John strips it all back to two essential things, two things this church community must do very well. They've got to believe in Jesus as God's own Son, the most complete way that God has revealed himself to us, and they've got to love one another. And when they do, Jesus will abide in them and they in him, and their relationship with God and one another will be deep and abiding, and full of love.

John reminds them of that wonderful moment when Jesus gave us the command to love one another, just as Christ himself has loved us, a love that took Christ to his death on the Cross. This kind of love is not really a warm hug of feeling or even really an emotion. Christ's gift of love has a depth and gravity that goes far deeper than that. Christ gives unconditional love for us, even to the point of death; he demands our unconditional love for each other in return.

What might love to the point of death mean, in the daily give-and-take of Christian life together? According to John, it means loving in truth and in action, not just in words. It means loving each other in ways that serve the same purpose as Jesus' death, and every Christian knows that Jesus died to save us, to free us from sin and to redeem us. If the problem hasn't changed from John's day to ours, then maybe the solution hasn't either: we are called to love, and to love redemptively, in ways that redeem, just like Jesus loves us. To redeem something means to buy it back, so when we talk about Jesus' redemptive love, we're talking about Jesus' love "buying us back" from the burden and pain of sin, freeing us from a life of brokenness and uncertainty, and gifting us with new, abundant grace-filled life now and forever.

Jesus' love was expressed in healing, in forgiveness, in building a community of faithful people, in feeding and caring for people, in listening and being present, and in rejecting boundaries of ethnicity and social position to offer that redeeming love to anyone who came seeking.

If we are going to love each other redemptively, the way Christ loves us, then our love needs to “buy each other back” for Jesus, too; it needs to be a love that heals and forgives, that builds and invites, that “sees a brother or sister in need” and does not refuse to help; a love that expresses itself in truth and in action.

We are called to love. We are called to be the face of the good news to one another, and we are called to live the good news of Christ’s redeeming love in the world, every single day of our lives.

On Friday morning this week, I was once more looking at the news with my morning cup of tea...and the headlines were not much better than on Wednesday. In fact, I think they might have been worse. But what if looking for positive stories, what if looking for signs of Christ’s love working away somewhere in our angry, defensive, frightened world is not the right approach?

Jesus called us to love, after all, not to go looking for it. Perhaps rather than looking for signs that point to Christ’s love, we Christians are meant to be those signs together instead. What if our church was the positive, good news headline, what if our church was a place, a small community within a community, that lives by a completely different set of rules than the rest of the world, expressing the good news anew for this time and place?

John – in his gospel and in his letter – advises us to centre our faith on who Jesus is, and to make sure our actions are driven by love for each other, in the same redemptive way that Christ loved us. The world’s been pushing back against the good news since that particular headline broke the story of the Cross two thousand years ago. And you know what: let it!

Because if we can find the capacity for Christ’s kind of redemptive love in our church, then we will continue to be a sign that points to the good news regardless; we’ll be a place where people come seeking that redeeming love and we’ll be the place where they can find it. Thanks be to God! Amen.