

“THE SECRETS IN THE SAUCE”

I John 3:16-24

April 21, 2024

There is a 2009 movie called *New In Town*, which stars Renee Zellweger, Harry Connick Jr. and Siobhan Fallon Hogan. Zellweger plays Lucy, a high-powered executive for a sunny Miami based company. She is suddenly sent to northern Minnesota to oversee the restructuring of a blue-collar food manufacturing plant. Lucy is a fish out of water. She hates the cold, the icy roads and the assortment of characters in this small town. However, she perseveres and begins a relationship with the union representative. Just as she is warming up to and being accepted by the community, she gets word from her corporation to start laying people off and closing down the plant.

Instead of following orders, Lucy begins searching for ways to save the plant. The solution comes in the form of tapioca pudding, which her good-hearted secretary, Blanche, makes. However, there is one problem. Up to this point in the movie Blanche has kept her home recipe a carefully guarded secret, especially from her friend, Trudy Van Uuden. In order to save the plant, she will have to give up that secret and share the recipe, at least with the people cooking at the factory.

Well, obviously the author of the letter we know as I John was not making tapioca pudding. However, he is making a similar point when it comes to love. Like Blanche's recipe, love doesn't do anyone any good unless it is shared. In John's mind, love that is hidden and kept secret is really no love at all. Now before we go any further, we need to

understand that John is not speaking about some kind of sticky sweet syrupy love from a romantic movie. Rather he writes about love being the mainspring of our faith.

John takes his love formula from the Old Testament. "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Leviticus 19:18). That's what God said to Moses and the people of Israel. As far as formulas go, it's terrific. For thousands of years, it has worked well in a variety of forms in most of the world's religions. Jews believe that "you shall love your neighbor as yourself." Hindus affirm that "one should not behave toward others in a way which is disagreeable to oneself." Buddhists say that you should "hurt not others in ways that you yourself would find hurtful." And Muslims believe that "no one of you is a believer until he desires for his brother that which he desires for himself."

There's nothing secret about this formula. Even Jesus endorsed it when he made it a part of his great commandment. "Love the Lord your God," and "love your neighbor as yourself". But surprisingly, in the first of his New Testament letters, John offers a new recipe: "**this is [God's] commandment, that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another**". In John's mind, Jesus is the new ingredient that when added to the love recipe enriches and deepens the experience for everyone who dares to taste the new life. What does this Christ ingredient do to love?

I. REAL LOVE GETS PRACTICAL

Almost 30 years ago, Gary Chapman wrote a little book called, **Five Love Languages, How to Express Heartfelt Commitment to Your Mate**. Even though it was written with couples in mind it really can help you express love in a variety of relationships. Gary Chapman outlines 5 ways that people like to give and receive love. I have not read the book but get the gist of it. The 5 love languages are Physical Touch, Words of Affirmation, Quality Time, Receiving Gifts, and Acts of Service. It's the last one that John focuses on.

Chapman states that Acts of Service is expressing love through practical actions. For instance, making breakfast or coffee for your spouse in the morning filling the other's car with gas and washing it, taking on a chore the other usually does, like folding laundry and actually matching socks, completing a home project that has been on their list, or leaving a note of encouragement. These are all practical ways to give love to a significant another.

Practical acts of service are what John is after. For starters, he wants to put a human face on the commandment to love one another beginning with the face of Jesus Christ. "**We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us**". John is not speaking about tender emotions and charitable thoughts. He's talking about costly cross bearing love. He's talking about giving of ourselves in practical ways as a central part of our life in Christ. John asks his followers, "**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?"

Christly love isn't just not doing harm to a neighbor; it is doing something for their good. One of the problems with so many of our societal issues is there is no face to them. We can wrangle over issues ad nauseum. Instead, John gives the issue a face. Poverty is one thing, our struggling neighbor Joe, has a name and a face. He is a real person with real needs. People are not an issue, they are beloved creations of God, made in God's image. Christian love isn't just being nice, it gives practical help.

II. REAL LOVE IS LIFE GIVING

Secondly, real love is life giving. In the passage before this John writes, **"For this is the message you have heard from the beginning; that we should love one another. We must not be like Cain who was from the evil one and murdered his brother."** John is using Cain from Genesis as an example of the way of death. You know it's not love when pride, hatred and sin are involved. These things result in death, which might not be physical, but it can be the death of a reputation, a friendship, a spirit or anything that takes away blessing and life.

John goes on to say, **"Whoever does not love abides in death. All who hate a brother or sister are murderers, and you know that murderers do not have eternal life abiding in them."** These are strong words. John believes that if we are not acting in love then we are acting

for death. Contrast that with Jesus who says, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life". "I came that they may have life and have it abundantly". "I am the way, and the truth and the life."

During the Second World War, an 18-year-old German named Jürgen Moltmann was drafted to serve in Hitler's army. Assigned to an anti-aircraft battery, he experienced the horror of watching fellow soldiers being incinerated in fire bombings. After surrendering to the British, he spent three years in prison camps, and saw how other German prisoners "collapsed inwardly, how they gave up all hope, sickening for the lack of it, some of them dying."

Moltmann had not grown up as a Christian, but an American chaplain gave him an Army-issue *New Testament and book of Psalms*, signed by President Roosevelt. He read the Psalms and found something he desperately needed: hope. He became convinced that God was present with him, "even behind the barbed wire." After being transferred to a camp run by the YMCA, Moltmann learned Christian beliefs, and experienced the love and the acceptance of the local population. They "treated me better than the German army," he told journalist Philip Yancey.

Jürgen Moltmann found new life in Christianity after seeing only death in the Second World War. The gospel was life-giving good news

for him, and it can be for us as well. Real love is life giving not life taking.

III. REAL LOVE IS SPIRITUALLY FREEING

John writes, **“And by this we will know that we are from the truth and will reassure our hearts before him whenever our hearts condemn us; for God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything.”**

John knows we are going to have doubts and fears and spiritual struggles. He knows the more we grow in Christ the more we will see our own sinfulness and fallenness from what God created us to be. We quickly discover the spiritual struggle going on in us as we attempt to orient our lives to Christ and loving others. At that point, we might begin to wonder if we are in Christ at all. However, that is the evidence we are in Christ. If there is no struggle to follow Christ then we ought to worry.

There is a Christian Speaker, whose name escapes me. But this man put together a video presentation where he made this statement. He said, **“I believe when we get to meet Jesus face to face, he is going to ask us one question and one question only. Did you know that I love you?”** The answer to that question makes all the difference in the world.

The good news is even though God sees all our imperfections, sins and doubts the Lord still loves us anyway. God’s love never fails, never is lost, and never gives up. God’s love is not dependent on our worthiness, faithfulness or merit. It is overflowing grace gift. God loves

because of who God is, not our level of lovableness. When we embrace that love we discover spiritual freedom. That's what real love does; it sets us free.

Think about it for a moment. So many of us are looking for love in all the wrong places. Because of our need to be loved we put our fragile egos on the line and will do almost anything to be noticed, affirmed, and accepted even by people and groups that are less than healthy. We think we have to be married and have children and have romance to know love. Yet, there are many family situations that are not exactly loving. Too often that kind of love seeking is really a tit for tat kind of relationship. We love and are loved based more on merit and earning it or feelings of what we deserve. We become trapped in a fantasy about love.

God's love frees us. It frees us to love regardless of whether someone loves us in return. In Christ, we discover we have been loved all along. We don't have to seek love because Jesus has been seeking us. Its in God's embrace we are fully loved, with a love so deep, we don't need co-dependencies, and ego boosts, and have to sacrifice by choosing bad relationships. We are completely fulfilled. Oh yes, its important to have loving relationships, part of being in community. It feels good to be told we are loved. But God's love frees us to be our best selves.

IV. REAL LOVE CONNECTS US WITH GOD

There is a bridge in Pittsburgh called the **Fort Duquesne Bridge**. For you non-Pittsburghers the bridge was given the nickname, "**The Bridge to Nowhere**" because the main span was finished in 1963, but due to delays in acquiring right of ways for the northern approach ramps and budgeting it did not connect on the north side of the Allegheny River. There the bridge ended in midair, rendering it useless. While the northwestern ramps were completed in 1969, it wasn't until 1986 when the northeastern ramps were completed. It was a bridge that wasn't connected to anything for 6 years and wasn't fully connected for 23 years.

The last thing real love does is it connects us to God and each other. John ends with this strange verse. **“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. All who obey his commandments abide in him, and he abides in them.”**

John links belief in Jesus with love for one another, knowing that the clearest example of love is the sacrificial life and death of Christ. The result of this new formula is a close connection to God, one in which "all who obey his commandments abide in him, and he abides in them".

The new connection between belief and love creates a new kind of life for us. Believing in Jesus and loving one another draws us closer to God and one another and allows us actually to *abide in God*. To abide is

to live or to dwell in something — to accept, observe and follow a particular path. So when we believe in Jesus and love one another, we abide in God and God abides in us. Love is the connection.

Theologian and philosopher Soren Kierkegaard told of a man who was walking down a city street when he saw a big sign in a window that said, **“Pants pressed here.”** Delighted to see the sign, he went home and gathered up all of his wrinkled laundry. He carried it into the shop and put it on the counter.

“What are you doing?” the shopkeeper demanded.

“I brought my clothes here to be pressed,” said the man, **“just like your sign said.”**

“Oh, you’ve got it all wrong,” the owner said. **“We don’t actually do that here. We’re in the business of making signs.”** We don’t do these things, he was saying. We just talk about them.

And that, said Søren Kierkegaard, is often the problem in the church. We advertise ourselves as a place that is showing Christ’s love and doing Christ’s work. But when people show up looking for real love and real Christian action, they don’t see it. **“Oh, no, we don’t love people here. We just talk about loving people here.”**

Well, John is doing some talking about love because he wants us to really do love. He teaches us that real love is practical, real love is life giving, real love sets us free, and real love connects us with God. How real is your love? Amen.

First Presbyterian Church in Hawley

Sunday, April 21, 2024

Second Scripture Lesson

I John 3:16-24

¹⁶We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another.

¹⁷How 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?

¹⁸Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.

¹⁹And by this we will know that we are from the truth and will reassure our hearts before him

²⁰whenever our hearts condemn us; for God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything.

²¹Beloved, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have boldness before God;

²²and we receive from him whatever we ask, because we obey his commandments and do what pleases him.

²³And 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.

²⁴All 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.

This is the Word of the Lord.

Thanks be To God.