

“How Would You Define Love?”

I John 3:16-24

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Recently, several four to eight year olds were asked what love means. As you would expect, their responses focused upon romantic love, but also love as they had seen it modeled by parents, friends and even pets. Let me share some of their ideas.

“Love is when a girl puts on perfume and a boy puts on shaving cologne and they go out and smell each other.”

“Love is when you tell a guy you like his shirt and he wears it everyday.”

“Love is when your eyelashes go up and down and little stars come out of you.”

“Love is when mommy gives daddy the best piece of chicken.”

“Love is when mommy makes coffee for daddy and takes a sip before giving it to him to make sure it is ok.”

“Love is when your puppy licks your face even after you left him alone all day.”

“Love is when you go out to eat and give somebody most of your French fries without making them give you any of theirs.”

I think John would especially like that last reply because it speaks of sacrifice. This was certainly on John’s mind when he penned his definition of love. “We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for one another” I John 3:16.

Allow me to be candid with you and tell you that this verse, and others like it, have always disturbed me. I usually walk away from them feeling guilty and confused. While there are some people for whom I would voluntarily lay down my life, there aren’t many. Quite frankly, I hope I am never faced with this choice. I don’t want anyone I know to be in that much danger and I truly want to live.

My study this week has helped me deal with this dilemma and given me a new appreciation for what John wrote. A more literal translation of this verse reveals a different emphasis. “We know love by this, that one on behalf of us his life put aside and we ought to also put aside our lives for one another.” I can embrace this concept. It reminds me of Paul’s challenge to the Romans when he encouraged them to become “living sacrifices.” This I can do.

What does it mean to “put your life aside?” Ask any parent in this congregation and they could tell you. Countless times everyday mothers and fathers set aside their own agenda, feelings, desires, goals or comfort to help their children. Interruptions are common and necessary. This is the basis of Christian love.

A broader look at this passage reveals two things about Christian love. It is community oriented and action filled. “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? Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action” I John 3:17-18.

“There is no love which does not become help,” Paul Tillich wrote. I think he captured the essence of John’s sermon to the early believers.

Speaking of sermons, may I share a concern I have about some I am hearing on television and radio? It appears to me that preachers are appealing to people’s selfishness and egos rather than their sense of duty and responsibility. They are not bashful about telling people what they must do to receive a blessing from God, be it material or spiritual. It seems the gospel they are proclaiming is all about me and my world, not God and His world. This low level of importance given to being a responsible and concerned part of any faith community disturbs me.

Four years ago, I preached a sermon titled, “Only at Baskin Robbins.” I quoted Thomas Scott, “The only evidence of life is growth,” and asked the question, “What have you learned over the years about God, life and yourself?” I answered my own question with these words.

“Life is not about me, but the Kingdom of God and welfare of my community. I have figured out that the only time life is about me is at Baskin Robbins when I am picking out an ice cream flavor. The smaller the decision, the more it is about me. On the contrary, the bigger the decision, the less it is about me.”

Continuing, I wrote, “What is most important is the eternal Kingdom of God and the role I play in advancing it. I am one actor on a big stage. I have a role to play everyday and the more I seek His will and do it, the happier I will be. When I try to make life about me, pleasing and satisfying my ego, the more frustrated and anxious I become. It’s that simple.”

Philip Gulley tells about an exercise he did in gym class while in school. The teacher put the entire class at one end of the gym and told the students to lift their hands high into the air. She then placed a large, heavy ball, called an earth ball, in their midst and told them to walk it down to the other end of the floor without dropping it. “It was tougher than you think,” he wrote.

We had to coordinate our movements to bounce it into the air without letting it fall to the floor. The task was made harder because it went against the grain. The most competitive among us would push it forward too hard and it would hit the floor before we scrambled underneath it. Only when we worked together, moving as a team that included everyone, could we move the earth ball from one end of the gym to the other. “Naturally, I hated the game,” Gulley writes, “but I learned a valuable lesson.”

“We were all one team; we had all been chosen. No one was left standing against the wall. Our task was to move the ball, a simple one if we worked together as a team, but impossible if we insisted on competing with each other. We needed everyone, the athlete and the bookworm, the prom queen and the nerd, the first and the last.”

Looking back, Gulley writes, “Thirty years later, I’m finally allowing the lessons of such games inform my theology. Life isn’t about assuring my own destiny while leaving those with greater handicaps behind. It isn’t about different religious teams competing for a single prize. A theology of grace is a theology in which everyone wins. Our task is to help the blind and the lame to the finish line, too.”

How do we do this? There are times when we must set our lives aside and reach out to help those that are struggling. We must focus more upon what they need and less on what we want. We must say no to insatiable appetites so that we can say yes to their well being. We must let go of what we are so tightly clutching so we can share with those who are empty-handed. We must lay aside hurt feelings and the desire for revenge so we can build bridges of reconciliation and hope.

This was what John wanted his readers to understand and model. The world, and to a degree the Christian community, were modeling self-indulgence and individualism. Even the believers in Ephesus were in danger of splintering and going their separate ways. They were too concerned about pursuing their own agendas at the expense of others. They needed reminding that authentic Christian love was sensitive to other’s needs.

I have always appreciated Leonard Griffith’s definition of a servant. “A servant is one who meets the needs of others at their convenience and expects no gratitude.” This is Christian love and a phone call I received last week so vividly demonstrates it.

While writing this sermon, I received a call from Larry Yates. At that time, Betty was in Embracing Arms Hospice in the final hours of her life. He called in the midst of his grief to express gratitude for this fine staff and wonderful church.

“I don’t know what we would do without all of you this week. Since Betty’s stroke on Sunday afternoon, my family and I are traveling down an unfamiliar road. We have never had to make life-support and Hospice care decisions. We are not prepared to make funeral arrangements and other decisions that accompany the death of a loved one. We have needed lots of love and support and the staff and so many wonderful church members have provided them in abundance. I know they have dropped what they are doing to walk with us and help us. Claire, Bill and I were

talking last night about how much it means to us to have so many people at our side offering wise counsel and compassion. I just had to call even before Betty leaves us and say thank you.”

If the writer of the epistle of John were here this morning, he would have a big grin on his face. “You got it,” I think he would say to us. “You model Christian love.”

Now we are facing another week filled with its own set of challenges and needs. I wonder if you will be the recipient of someone’s sacrificial love or the one that needs to help others. Either way you are going to need God’s help. Let’s ask Him for it now.