

Love in Action

April 28, 2024

St. Mark Presbyterian Church
Eastminster Presbyterian Church
1 John 4:7-21

Prayer

Let us pray. Alpha and Omega – God of beginnings, God of endings, and God of the every day and in between times, help us to experience and respond to your love. Take and use my words to empower our imaginations, awaken us to new possibilities, and embolden us in our actions. Amen.

Introduction

I wonder how short the shortest sermon ever preached in a Presbyterian Church was. Could it be that somewhere a brave minister stood up and offered a single sentence or even just a single word and sat back down? I imagine if you were in attendance, it would have been a sermon you still remember.

Over the years I've given enough children's sermons to know that the default answer to any question asked on the chancel steps is "Jesus." And, the youngest theologians are right to begin there.

For those of us who have been trying to follow the Way of Jesus for many years I wonder if we might find a common word. Here in this community of faith what word would you choose?

Around 15 years ago when I was serving First Presbyterian Church in Naples, Florida a new book came out that explored what young adults outside the church thought about Christianity. The class I offered on it was well attended and our discussions were difficult yet enlightening.

The book's title tells you nearly all you need to know about the perception of the young adults that were then in their late teens and 20s and are now in their 30s and 40s: *UnChristian: What a New Generation Thinks About Christianity . . . and Why It Matters*.¹

Based on several national surveys the authors concluded that younger people outside the church were turned off to Christianity because of the ways they saw Christians behaving. They saw Christians as a

¹ *UnChristian: What a New Generation Thinks About Christianity . . . and Why It Matters* by David Kinnaman (Baker Books, 2007).

whole as a religious body known primarily for what they were against. And they wanted nothing to do with us because they saw us as a hypocritical, judgmental, selfish, and sheltered group.

And, frankly, siblings in Christ, our nation has only become more divided and our news stories more negative in the years since.

So what is really at the center?

- For children, it is Jesus
- For many non-Christians, Christians are best known for who and how they hate or go about advancing matters of self-interest
- For those gathered here today, it is likely more complicated and your individual responses are likely reasoned and diverse

Love

The author of this morning's Epistle lesson, wants us to start with love.

Love.

What if Christians – in all of our many expressions and denominations – were known for being a people of love?

When it comes to love, the best-known passage in all of Scripture is 1 Corinthians 13 – a text that explores what love looks like.

But perhaps the best-known verse comes from today's reading – v.16 – God is love. This is a truth that follows and builds from the one disclosed a few verses earlier: Love is from God (v. 7).

We are invited to experience a God who is love and a God who first loved us. And, we are challenged to answer a question some of us would rather not be asked: if we cannot love our neighbors who we can see, how can we love God who we cannot see?

Reflecting on this passage, New Testament Professor Sherri Brown writes,

We must, therefore, challenge ourselves to push beyond our comfort zones to do new things. This, indeed, is how we love as Christ loved, and as God loves us. Sacrifice can be life and limb, and when it is it should be honored as such. But it doesn't have to be.

Every time we step beyond where we'd rather be, what we'd rather do, into what might embarrass or negatively impact us in order to share God's love, we answer this call.

This is our summons. God is love. Be bold. Don't fear. Share yourself. Do love. This is what will sustain us . . .²

The time has come for us to live out our faith. We need to be so devoted to the work of love that the media, our neighbors, and even our own families cannot help but take notice.

Stories of love in action deserve amplification. Christians who love God by loving neighbor are all around us.

Story #1

First, I'd like to share what I call the miracle of healing and hope. Or, if you prefer a longer and more descriptive title, call it "the miracle of making quality healthcare accessible to the uninsured and underinsured all around us."

Did you know that Texas leads the nation in uninsured residents?³ While the number is down a bit from the all time high, currently around 5 million Texans lack medical insurance. And, the vast majority of these folks are among the working poor.

Nearly 1 in 5 Texans - people made in God's image - delay or deny themselves medical care for fear of the costs and long-term medical debt that could result.

Thankfully, people of faith are stepping up in a wide variety of ways to help. Did you know that there is a statewide non-profit organization called the Texas Association of Charitable Clinics that provides free or very low cost healthcare to more than 100,000 Texans every year?

How is that possible? Well, first, it is possible because of love. There are more than 80 clinics in this network and most were started by people of faith who wanted to love their neighbors. Today, more than

² "Commentary on 1 John 4:7-21" in *Working Preacher* by Sherri Brown, available at www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revise-common-lectionary/fifth-sunday-of-easter-2/commentary-on-1-john-47-21-6

³ The percentage of uninsured Texans in 2022 dropped to the lowest in a decade by William Melhado. Texas Tribune, September 14, 2023.

3,500 medical professionals across the state donate their time and expertise alongside many others who volunteer in administrative roles.

I am one of those administrative volunteers, serving on the organization's Board of Directors. In that capacity, I've visited a number of clinics in Dallas and beyond.

And, I've seen firsthand how their acts of love change lives:

- People who were able to return to the workforce after receiving care for undiagnosed issues.
- People who gained access to the medication needed to manage chronic conditions and improve their quality of life.
- People who received life-changing procedures and even life-extending surgeries.

This is one way followers of the Way of Jesus are stepping outside of their comfort zones and in doing so are transforming their communities.

Story #2

Next, I'd like to share with you the miracle of the feeding of the 500.

I have the privilege of serving as the CEO of White Rock Center – an ecumenical ministry that your congregation has supported for many years. And, a place where people of faith come together to serve neighbors in need with food, clothing, and empowerment.

Last year we surveyed those we serve to learn what they felt we were doing well and also to inquire how we might serve more helpfully in the future. The biggest challenge that emerged was a request to provide help on Saturday. So, we committed to try something.

For the last few months of last year, one Saturday a month we provided food using a drive through distribution. As we tried this out, we hoped that we might serve as many folks on a Saturday as we do on a typical weekday. Every Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday and Friday, we serve around 20 to 25 families. On normal weekdays the White Rock Center of Hope Food Pantry serves around 100 people.

The first few Saturdays we exceeded our expectation, providing food for between 30 to 50 families. And, then we took a step of faith pledging to make Saturday food distribution a regular thing in 2024.

Siblings in Christ, we said yes because this was a way we were called to love our neighbors and yet we knew that we lacked the resources to make this happen. I reached out to churches that support White Rock Center of Hope inviting them to send groups of volunteers to serve on a Saturday. And, the response has been overwhelming.

Over the last four months, Baptists and Lutherans, Presbyterians and Unitarians, and even non-denominational folks have volunteered. They have come from the North and South, East and West. They have come from little churches and big churches and everything in between.

As this started to grow, I began to envision it as a modern day feeding of the 500. And within just a couple of months we grew to that size. Now, every first and third Saturday of the month 20 to 30 volunteers feed 600 to 700 neighbors.

If you have ever driven down Garland Road during this bi-monthly miracle of love, you'll see a line of vehicles extending as far as your eyes can see. Love in action is a beautiful sight to behold.

Story #3

Finally, I'd like to share with you the miracle of love in action by individuals. While you can make an impact through your church and through other groups you belong to, you can also get involved on your own.

Opportunities abound because Jesus taught us that everyone is our neighbor. And, each and every person we encounter matters to God and therefore to us.

I think of the creative ways individuals of all ages have clothed neighbors in need. In recent months, I met with a high school student and an octogenarian who each wanted to do their part to extend the ministry of clothing folks in our community.

The young man sourced socks – involving family and friends to deepen his impact. The senior saint asked her friends to celebrate her milestone birthday by donating new underwear. Together these actions provided the most basic of garments for neighbors in need. And, along with donations of outerwear by others, provided the inventory for the White Rock Center of Hope Clothing Closet.

I recognize that feeding, clothing, and providing medical care are some of the ways individuals show love, but serve as a representative rather than an exhaustive list.

I'd love to hear your story . . .

- Perhaps you stock a little free library or read to children.
- Maybe you check in on friends and fellow church members.
- Or it may be that you are a community volunteer – lending your time and talent to any number of causes.

For those in our midst who are humble, it may be outside of your comfort zone to talk about all you do for others. If that is you, I invite you to consider that sharing your story could inspire someone else to act. And, our collective storytelling is the way we stay focused on what really matters and find strength to live out our faith day by day.

We love because God first loved us.

We cannot help ourselves.

We are compelled to live lives of love in action.

Conclusion

Siblings in Christ, I've said a lot today. I've invited you to think. Hopefully, I've encouraged you and also motivated myself to act. And yet, I'll wonder if maybe I should have said less.

- If I had a bit more courage perhaps I could have preached a five word sermon: You are love in action.
- Or, if we knew one another better, I could have managed it in three words: Love, keep loving.
- Or, if I was incredible bold, maybe just one word: Love.

It is my hope and prayer that this congregation and all who gather here will be known for their love.

Amen.