

Love Is Stronger Than Death  
1 John 3: 16 – 24  
Makemie Presbyterian Church  
May 3, 2009

<sup>16</sup>We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. <sup>17</sup>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 help? <sup>18</sup>Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action. <sup>19</sup>And by this we will know that we are from the truth and will reassure our hearts before him

<sup>20</sup>whenever our hearts condemn us; for God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything. <sup>21</sup>Beloved, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have boldness before God; <sup>22</sup>and we receive from him whatever we ask, because we obey his commandments and do what pleases him.

<sup>23</sup>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. <sup>24</sup>All 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 ends the reading of the word of God.

Love is the infinite which is given to the finite. Death is given power over everything finite, especially in our period of history. But death is given no power over love. Love is stronger. It creates something new out of the destruction caused by death; it bears everything & overcomes everything. It is at work where the power of death is strongest, in war & persecution & homelessness & hunger & physical death itself. It is omnipresent & here & there, in the smallest & most hidden ways as in the greatest & most visible ones, it rescues life from death. It rescues each of us, for love is stronger than death.

This epistle this letter, most scholars concur, was written by the Apostle John. He is called the beloved disciple. That is, of all the disciples of Jesus, John knew what love was. He was closest to Jesus, closer than all the other disciples. John was the only disciple who was present at Jesus' crucifixion on Calvary; the other disciples had run away. When Jesus was dying on the cross, he entrusted the care of his mother to John the Apostle. Jesus knew that John would take care of his mother in all circumstances. He was trustworthy, more than Jesus' own brothers & sisters. The Apostle John knew what love was, more than any of the disciples and that is why he was called the beloved disciple.

What else about this John? He is the only eyewitness of our four gospels about Jesus' life. Only John claims to have been an eyewitness of Jesus' life; not the others. Not Matthew, Mark or Luke. Only John claims to be an eyewitness & we get from him a fine eye for detail; such as Jesus walking in Solomon's portico in the temple in the dead of winter or these details from Good Friday when Jesus was on the cross & John tells us of a bowl, not a cup, full to the brim, of vinegar not wine & how the soldiers lift up the sponge full of vinegar on a branch of hyssop, not on a spear. These are details reported to us by an eyewitness. The Apostle John knew love. John wrote these words, "And this is God's commandment, that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ & love one another, just as he has commanded us." But what if we can't do what Jesus is asking? What if we're unable to believe in Christ the way that God wants us to? What if we don't love the way that Christ wants us to love? What then?

We heard Ted read the answer from our text this morning, "When our hearts condemn us, God is stronger than our hearts."

What?

“When our hearts condemn us, God is stronger than our hearts.”

When we feel we are sufficiently unable to believe & love, remember this, “God’s love is stronger than our condemning hearts.”

This is something the apostle John seemed to sense better than anyone among the New Testament writers. The letter of I John is by no means the longest letter in the New Testament & yet by far it contains more references to love than any other New Testament book, including the gospels. The word "love" crops up thirty-five times in this brief letter. By comparison the entire book of Romans has "love" only fourteen times & even with its elegant ode to love in I Corinthians 13, I Corinthians contains the word "love" just sixteen times. But then, John's gospel also has the word love almost twice as many times as it comes up in any of the other three gospels.

John saw love as the number one defining trait of God & of God’s children, that’s us. Loving one another in imitation of God is, John writes a little earlier in chapter 3, is the message we have heard "from the beginning." Those of you familiar with John's style know that he liked to use that word "beginning" as a Genesis-like harkening back to the original creation. "In the beginning was the Word & the

Word was with God," is how John famously opened his gospel. This letter also opens in a similar way, "That which was from the beginning, which we have heard & which we have seen with our eyes & touched--this we proclaim concerning the Word of life."

And now in this third chapter John says that love is also "from the beginning." Love was from the beginning because God was in the beginning. Love, in other words, has something to do with the very creation in which we live & of which we are a part. Creation itself sprang from the bubbling overflow of God's love. Creation is that overflow of love. God wanted to *share* the life and the love he already had so exquisitely among Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

The Greek theologians of the Trinity in the early church liked to talk about what they termed "perichoresis," which is a Greek word meaning in essence the love shared by the three persons in the Godhead. Whereas in the Western tradition of the church we have tended to depict the Trinity as a triangle, the Eastern church has always preferred a circle. The Trinity is like an ever-moving circle of dance in which Father, Son, & Holy Spirit constantly & forever move in & thru one another in perfect bliss, harmony, & self-forgetful joy.

The three persons of God are so invested in one another, so interested in one another, so caring of one another that although three persons they form just one God.

So it is no surprise that at some point those three persons decided that so great was this love, so focused was this love on the other, that they wanted an entire universe of others with whom to further share the love. God was under no compulsion to create anything. Yet it is just so *like* God to want to create, to want to share the love. God's motivation to create the world might be similar to what motivates us to invite as many friends as we can to the wedding of one of our children or to an anniversary celebration: we want to widen the circle of our own love & joy; we want to *share* the grand event with those who are close to us. Maybe something like this brought about creation in the first place: the love of God within the Trinity bubbled over in a desire to spread the joy.

The phone calls come at all times of the year but they begin to intensify at this time of year. I can usually tell just by the tone of the voice, a mixture of hope, happiness & considerable anxiety what their next question will be. Can you perform a wedding on such & such a

date? As a Presbyterian minister over the last 8 years I have officiated at 31 ceremonies in all imaginable settings. We have done it on the beach, in parks, in hotels, in churches, in stately & humble homes, on river banks & river paddleboats & in tiny rowboats where we merrily bobbed along on large ocean waves. I have watched anxiously as a couple, dressed in heavy satin, stood with sweat pouring down their faces in bright sun & 100 degree weather, wondering; will they keel over? Will I? We have done weddings shaded by umbrellas in pouring rain, and in weather so cold that the shivering bride turned blue in her gloves & a muffler. We have battled all sorts of unexpected perils; mosquitoes, gnats, bees, drunk wasps in the wine glasses, a dog as ring-bearer, lost wedding rings, traffic tickets for speeding bridesmaids an hour late to the wedding, & small children who crawled up under the bride's dress.

So do these experiences make me an expert on love? Hardly. But I have developed a tender affection for the couples, so different from each other and yet they all have such a touching faith in each other. They come to me carrying tender and fragile hopes, hopelessly and helplessly in love. If they are very young they still believe in happily ever after and know that theirs will be a perfect union. I may

try to tell them that there is no such thing in this world as a perfect marriage but they do not believe me.

We learn first about love as young children as we move from being entirely self-centered to the realization that there is a world & a parent outside ourselves. We discover we can both please & hurt our mother & she us. We are utterly dependent, helpless & we have to trust our caregivers to survive. If they love us enough we learn how to give such love ourselves. That is our most fundamental, most basic lesson in what it means to be human. If a child is neglected, abandoned or abused that child will have a harder time learning how to give love. Or that child may decide that they are not worthy of love. Some of the most destructive people in this world never do connect with others and their universe remains that of an infant. Their survival and satisfactions matters more and others never really enter into the equation except as extensions of them. Love, as I understand it, always has to do with connection. We have empathy for other sentient beings, we are in awe of the larger universe and we love this varied, magnificent and wondrous world around us. People who have

no empathy know only the most extreme of emotions. Such people always put their needs first & ultimately *only* allow their needs to count, it is as if they were never really born into *this* world where we live interconnected & interdependent.

You've probably heard the story about the older couple at their fifty year anniversary party who were asked if they had ever thought about splitting up. "No", they answered: "We have never seriously considered divorce but murder, frequently!"

Any relationship, any love, friendship, marriage or union worth its salt will grow & change. But if we do not like or love ourselves it becomes very difficult to love the other in a way that will not hurt us. If we have a harsh & critical voice inside us how can we think highly of someone who loves us? If we do not think ourselves worthy of long lasting love we won't find it. Sue Bender recalls: *"For as long as I can remember I have been listening to a harsh critical voice inside me, but I have lived with it so long that I never really noticed the influence it was having on my life. I not only listened I believed what this harsh judge was saying. The voice passes judgment on everything I do. Nothing I do will ever be enough."*

How many of us have such a voice? Love thy neighbor as

thyself only makes good sense if you do love yourself. To be intimate means to be profoundly interior. In Latin it comes from the word inter, meaning within. To be fully known & loved as we are is liberating, comforting & evokes deep gratitude. It is that ideal, innermost love that so many religions search for. Presbyterians see God as such a love. And this is confirmed by our text Ted just read a moment ago. "We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us."

That we dare to love each other knowing full well that we are all mortal is an act of great courage. Love can make us better people; Which is something we strive for. One of the bad jokes of evolution is that we have evolved brains so that we can imagine a state of perfection that we cannot achieve. But for which we are constantly striving.

Which could be one of the definitions of religion as well: holding us to ideals we will never fully reach. Did you know how much of what we do here with each other has to do with love? I'll invoke Lacy Harwell once again, friend & mentor who told me that, after nearly 50 years in the ministry he had finally figured out what it was he did on Sunday mornings. "Life is hard on people. They come here wounded & bruised from their week, they are tired, worn out, stressed &

discouraged. Some of them feel pretty badly about themselves too. So I tell them: `You are all right. God loves you & I'm trying. Now go home.' And next Sunday I do it all over again."

While I might not say it exactly like that, I think Lacy was on to something.

Love is expressed in many small ways, in kind & generous acts within a community & within our families. That is why I submit myself to the weekly ritual of sermon writing with its doubts & pains. But I do not always feel loving. There are days I want to sleep in & days when I am peopled out & have great difficulty feeling loving toward anybody including myself. Yet is on such days that acting in a loving manner may be most important. And love is in the small things.

There are things I still contemplate that Mother Theresa has written. Most & agree with, some I struggle to accept, some I disagree with. But when she said: "We do not do *great things*, we only do small things with great love." To that I say, "Amen."