

1 John 3:16-20

¹⁶ This is how we have come to know love: Jesus laid down his life for us. And we also should lay down our lives for our brothers. ¹⁷ Whoever has worldly wealth and sees his brother in need but closes his heart against him—how can God’s love remain in him? ¹⁸ Dear children, let us love not only with word or with our tongue, but also in action and truth. ¹⁹ This is how we know that we are of the truth and how we will set our hearts at rest in his presence: ²⁰ If our hearts condemn us, God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything.

Sermon for Easter 5, May 2, 2021 St. Paul’s, Green Garden

Text: 1 John 3:16-20

Theme: “Love Has No Limit”

In the name of Jesus, dear fellow redeemed,

We recognize that most everything we do in life, we do within limits. When I am driving a care there is a speed limit for the safety of both the driver and passengers in the car I am driving. The limits are also there for the safety of others on the road. We know, the faster the vehicle goes the greater chance the driver has of losing control which could cause serious injury and possibly death.

God has also set limits on human behavior. The limits are necessary because our sinful nature does not want to live within limits, or rather it wants to determine its own limits. So God set up limits in the Ten Commandments,. We know he did this to make us aware of our sins and our need for a Savior. He also did it to limit the damage of sin in our lives even if we don’t understand his love for us in doing this. The limits of the law are part of God’s act of love for us. What we human beings often fail to see is that God does not set a limit on our acts of love. But so often we withhold love, or we set limits on love as a way of punishing someone for something they did against us. Or we limit our love to someone as a wedge to get what we want. But that kind of behavior is also an offense to God because God simply says to us, love one another. God sets no limit on love. He shows us this truth in human form, in the form of Jesus his Son. We see it in the completely sinless life Jesus lived. We see it in all he did on Good Friday and Easter. We see it in Jesus ascension and in his ruling the universe for the good of all believers. We will see it also when he comes to judge the living and the dead.

In this Easter season, the apostle John again reminds us to take the long view of things. During this season we not only celebrate Jesus’ resurrection and our future resurrection from the dead. We also come to understand, Easter affects our everyday behavior with each other. The apostle John impresses this on us by

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showing us the truth that love has no limit. It is unlimited in giving; unlimited in acting; and unlimited in comforting.

The most extreme contrast in the universe is that between our sin and God's love. The sinfulness of the human race seems to have no limit. We read in Genesis 6 how the human race, after the fall into sin had piled up offense upon offense against God. People had become extremely violent. God's patience was running out. He had promised to send a Savior from sin. But parents had stopped teaching this truth of God's love to their children. People allowed sin to run wild in their lives. We can imagine that our world today is not much different from the time before the flood. We can look in the mirror and see the same loveless sins in our own lives can't we? But while human sin seems unlimited, God's love truly has no limits. John put it in simple words: "**This is how we have come to know love: Jesus laid down his life for us.**" Jesus himself said: "**The Good Shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.**"

You see, it was not enough for God to send his Son to relieve us of some of our earthly suffering. Jesus came to show us truth. He came to show us that we will suffer eternally because of our sins. But he came to earth to sacrifice himself, to lay down his life for us selfish, self-seeking sheep. He came to give his holy life to pay for our lives full of soul-destroying sin.

We hear the suffering of his soul in the pains of hell when he cried out, "**My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?**" Look into the mirror of God's law and see how selfish you have been. See how self-serving your actions are when you determine only to show love for someone else when he or she shows love for you. Look into the mirror of God's law and hear the words you have said that have caused someone else pain and sorrow. Our sins have virtually no limit. But listen to John again: "**This is how we have come to know love: Jesus laid down his life for us.**" Do you hear any limit in those words? Since our sins are without limit and Jesus gave his life for us, his love for us has no limit.

This means he gives us his unlimited forgiveness. This means, day in and day out as we come to him in contrition and repentance he already announces to you and me his full, complete pardon and forgiveness. Remember, you are his child by faith in Jesus. His unlimited love also means he gives you faith to believe his forgiveness is real. He does not set any limit on his forgiveness, just as Jesus said to Peter when he asked, "How many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me, up to seven times?" Jesus answered him, "Not seven times, but seventy-seven times."

As children of God, we can say he has given us the best of everything he has. He gave us the life of his Son, and by that he gives us unending life with him.

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Since we have the best, we can afford to give our family members, fellow believers and others what we have. John says, “**Whoever has worldly wealth and sees his brother in need but closes his heart against him—how can God’s love remain in him?**” Here is the fruit of Jesus’ unlimited love for us. We show the same love to each other since we are members of the same family. Now we look in the mirror and we see that we are children of God. What else can we do but show his love to each other?

Your expressions of love to your fellow believers who are sick or suffering are fruits of the Savior’s love to you. Your forgiveness to a brother or sister who has sinned against you shows you understand the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from ALL sin. It cleanses everybody else, too. Not just me. Forgiveness is not something that I take for myself and run. No, I stand and live in this world and forgive others as my Lord Jesus forgave me.

With forgiveness, Jesus gives us the riches of the world. So we need have no fear of helping someone who is in need of material necessities of life as if we might not have enough for ourselves. Since Jesus gives us every eternal blessing, since his love for us has no limit, we never need to be afraid to give his gifts to someone else. He gives so that we can also give. So John tells us, when we give, when we do any act of love, let it come from a heart that knows the limitless love Jesus gave us. Then our actions come from hearts of true love—love whose actions are unlimited.

When we see our world, and our own hearts in the sinful condition we are by nature our Savior’s attitude of love toward us is really amazing. He did not simply look down at our world and God’s heart of love is never a heart that refuses to act. In fact, just the opposite. God’s heart of love is always a heart that acts on behalf of those he loves. He is not like us. We may say, “The lawn really needs to be mowed,” or “The dishes really need to be washed—but then we fail to act. And, of course, there are times when the lawn or dishes or another household job will have to wait. But that may very well mean we need to act on something else that IS more urgent or even an emergency. But our God never leaves anything undone, especially where it concerns actions of love on our behalf.

Jesus used the parable of the Good Samaritan as an example of loving actions—actions that come from the heart. You remember that Jesus told about a merchant who traveled between Jerusalem and Jericho. Some thieves ambushed him and jumped him in a remote area where few people would see. They beat him badly and stole his goods. He was bleeding, badly bruised but alive. You also remember that a priest and a Levite both encountered this man, wounded and dying. Now the priest was a fellow Jew and you would think he would have had compassion on his fellow countryman. But here is where we see what came from this man’s heart. He

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passed by the wounded man. He had no compassion for him even though his life was ebbing away. Now the priest was surely a teacher and an instructor in God's Word. He should have understood the principle of love in God's laws. But he did not translate it into actions. This is why John says to us here: **Dear children, let us love not only with word or with our tongue, but also in action and truth.** Both the priest and the Levite could teach about God's love but they apparently did not convert their knowledge into actions, and truth, that is, actions that come from the heart.

The Samaritan on the other hand, had not real reason to love the man who had been beaten. The merchant was probably fairly wealthy. Just because of his social standing and because he had more wealth, if he had met this Samaritan on the street he may have looked down on him. But then you add to this the fact that Samaritans were despised because they were not fully Jews and they did not follow God's laws or worship at Jerusalem. The Samaritan would have had not compelling reason to help the wounded man. But we see what was in this man's heart. He helped the wounded man because he was hurt and dying, not because he deserved it.

Friends, this is how our Savior loved us. John says, "dear children." He speaks to us as our Savior would. His words remind us that Jesus showed his love for us in his actions. He reminds us that "word-love" and "tongue-love" are nothing more than hypocrisy. And we have all been guilty of loving family, friends and neighbors by talking about love but then not following through on it. This is why we need Jesus' sacrifice for our sins on the cross—to cleanse us of all our sins. Then we not only see, but we feel and we understand the love Jesus has for us. He acted. His actions move us to action, for in Jesus we see what love means. We receive his forgiveness in faith and we let his forgiveness move us to love with our actions. We are forgiven sinners helping and loving fellow forgiven sinners. This is an important truth to remember. Forgiveness is never out of style as far as Jesus is concerned. Forgiveness is how he shows us his love has no limit. When we are living with our fellow forgiven sinners, the comfort we receive from Jesus has no limit. Therefore the comfort we give to others from Jesus has no limit.

Sometimes we allow our consciences to plague us unnecessarily. Sometimes our sins are so vivid in our minds, even though we may have committed them days, weeks or even years ago. Satan is a good student of our sinful nature. He loves to build reminders of our sins in so many ways. He may even put in front of us the same temptation that caused us to fall into sin. He almost seems to taunt us, "Just TRY to resist this sin—if you can." And even if we don't fall again, sometimes our heart condemns us doesn't it. John understood this: "**This is how we know that we are of the truth and how we will set our hearts at rest in his presence: ²⁰If**

our hearts condemn us, God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything.” How do we know that we belong to the truth? John says we know we belong to the truth because the gospel is powerful. It has the power to cleanse your heart, to cause you to believe that Jesus died and rose from the dead. The power of the gospel is God’s pronouncement that you are not guilty. This verdict brings about a new birth in us. We change. This power of the gospel means our actions change.

The power of God’s gospel love, in word and sacrament changes you in your actions. John is really saying that you can find comfort first in the gospel. But when Satan throws a roadblock in your life and challenges your belief that you are a child of God, John actually says you can also look at your actions. Are your actions fruits of faith in Jesus? Fruits of faith flow out of a living Christian. So John is really saying, don’t let Satan’s accusations choke out your love. Remember, good deeds flow from a living Christian. You are alive in Christ. Your actions and words ARE going to be the light that shines in the world so people see your good deeds and words and glorify God. God also sees your deeds done out of love. He does not take them lightly. Each one is precious to him. So don’t let Satan put up a smoke screen and deceive you into thinking that your deeds don’t measure up. Jesus measured up. He washed you clean. Your deeds flowing from your faith show that faith in Jesus lives in your heart.

God knows this truth and he sees your faith and your deeds. Let Jesus’ unlimited love shine into your life and keep letting your light shine. And remember, even believers such as the apostle Paul and Martin Luther and countless unnamed saints throughout the centuries have fought these battles against Satan. But even when we do fail, remember that the love of Jesus has no limit. You can come again and again and drink from the well of salvation and receive forgiveness and strength to live and fight and live again day by day. We do it by the grace and power of our Lord’s love for us when he gave his life at the cross. Amen.