

4-25-21
Easter 4
1 John 3:16-24

Let us Love!

Most of us try to be helpful when we're asked to be. Sometimes we all fall into the same trap. We think we're being helpful, but the help we offer winds up sounding a lot easier than it is.

Nancy Reagan was sincere back in the '80's when she adopted Just Say No as a plan to reduce or eliminate illegal drug use. But anyone who has ever struggled with addictive behaviors of any kind know that it's not quite as simple as that slogan makes it sound.

It sounds so long ago now that Rodney King asked why we can't just all get along. With a verdict handed down this week and three more shootings in its wake, we still haven't found a way to do what sounds so easy.

The choir I sing with in Hattiesburg has recently begun rehearsals again—socially distanced, everybody's vaccinated. We're trying to get ready for our part in the month-long summer festival Hattiesburg does in June. I'll let you know more about it as it gets closer, but the music we're singing is beautiful and difficult. We have learned that the composer will be with us for our concert. No pressure there! We're still learning, but any of you who have ever sung in a choir know that directors are always ahead of us and think we know more than we do. In a recent rehearsal, our director was working on a particularly dramatic part of a piece, telling us how he wanted it to come out. His comments were directed particularly at the basses. The piece goes back and forth between quiet and meditative sections and some pretty loud and emphatic ones. He has a strong, solo voice as well as being a good director. He took us to this one place in the score and showed us how he wanted us to do it; he wanted loud thundering, resounding low notes from the bass section. I

sing baritone with three other guys. Only two of us were that that night, and the other guy heard what Joey wanted and quickly let him know that baritone voices don't do that even when we know the part! We'll see how it goes in June.

When we can do something, it's easy for us to assume that others can do it, too.

Those of you who have spent much time around me know that I try to avoid a lot of should's and ought's when I'm talking with you about issues we face in the church and in our lives both in and beyond it. Oh, I believe there are plenty of things we should do, plenty of things we ought to do, but those decisions are not always mine to make. They are more usually ours to make together, and it can be pretty polarizing when one of us tries to make the rules for all the rest of us. When one of us assumes that we know how all the rest of us are going to feel about something, we sometimes wind up getting nothing done when we could have taken another route and maybe agreed on doing something!

John must have been absent the day Jesus taught the disciples about being careful with the should's and ought's. He makes life in community sound a lot easier than it usually turns out to be. We know God's love because Jesus laid down his life for us. We probably all agree with that. It's just been three weeks since Easter. The Easter cross is still up, so we know we're still going to hear about the power of God's love that raised Jesus from the dead this time of year. So none of us would argue the fact that the Resurrection of Jesus from the dead is the surest sign of God's love that the world has ever seen. But then John did what preachers tend to do. He just can't let that wonderful truth stand on its own merit. He's got to make it connect with our lives and the life we share together in the Church. Because God loved us enough to send Jesus to lay down his life for us, then we ought to lay down our lives for one another. For John, then, self-sacrifice is an ordinary part of Christian life. The Christian life is a life lived for others, a life built around self-sacrifice.

Again, most of us would not disagree with that. But lay down our life? That's a big expectation. Most of us can probably identify a handful of people for whom we would be willing to die, if it helped them to live. Some of those people may be sitting on the pew with you today. We tend to sit with family and others who are closest to us when we're here, but if you look very far beyond the end of your pew, and if you could be totally honest about it, you'd probably have to stop and think before you committed to give your life for any of the rest of us. We didn't tell you that when you joined the church. That was not among the questions you had to stand before us or the Session and answer. This afternoon in Confirmation Class, I'll be reviewing those church membership questions with Lydia and Natalie, but I won't ask them, "Would you lay down your life for another member of the Church?" They've been a lot of fun to work with in class, and I know they'd tell me the truth. So I don't think I'll ask.

Fortunately, most of us won't have to make that decision. For most of us, the stakes are much lower than John makes them sound. But that principle is still important for us to hear. Laying down our lives may not have to mean what it literally says, but it may well mean that we learn to set our own claim on things aside when we strive to live for the good of others. Whenever we lay down the completely normal human desire to have things our way, to live for ourselves, to assume that everyone else wants the same things we do—whenever we make an effort to care about what others want, we are, in a sense, laying down our life for another.

Some of you have heard stories from me before about the church in Tennessee where we served before we came here. It was really two congregations meeting in the same building. There was the 8:30 crowd who sang only contemporary Christian music. That means they sang about seven songs, and they sang them over and over again. Really the music leaders did most of the singing, and most of the rest listened and let them. I knew we were in for some conversation one spring when I showed up at praise band practice and asked them if they could maybe work up

something special and appropriate for Easter. They let me know in a hurry that they liked the seven songs they knew and that they'd sing some of them on Easter. When I persisted that it was Easter and that maybe that called for something different, we arrived at one of those should and ought moments before I intended for us to get there. You see where I am this morning and where they are, so you know who won that one!

The other congregation showed up at 11:00, after Sunday School. They didn't like those seven songs the early church bunch sang. They liked hymns. Three of them. Tied to the lectionary. Out of the hymn book. Maybe a new one if it was Presbyterian enough, whatever that means, but mostly one of the eight hundred or more in the book. They weren't real crazy about the drums and the other things the early church folks left behind, but as long as no one tried to use them, it was OK.

Those two congregations occupied the same building from September to May, but in the summer, that church only had one worship time, at ten o'clock. That's the way it had been for years before I arrived. They rotated Sundays. We'd sing some of those seven songs one week and we'd sing hymns the next. You know what that meant. You only went to church on the week they were doing your music.

There is, of course, the matter of the offering. We've had our own issues with that over the past year, and I want to commend those of you who have been faithful in your giving during these strange days. It didn't work that way there. Summer is always a stretch for most churches, but when only half of your folks come on any given Sunday, it doesn't take long for that to show up in the offering.

So I thought I had a good plan—no should's or ought's in it—when I sat down with the Session and suggested that maybe we could sing some of each other's music, and maybe even some children's songs from Sunday School and maybe even a new song or two in the summer and we could all do it together—every week for those ten or twelve summer Sundays.

You'd have thought I had asked them to line up and give a kidney for a member of their Sunday School class. One of them looked me straight in the face and said, "But I don't like their music!" And another one said, "You're supposed to sing out of the hymn book!"

They were still trying to get along with their new pastor in those days, so they agreed to give it a try. It was a disaster. Those early church folks all sat together and sang their stuff and refused to pick up a hymn book. And the late church folks glared at them while they sang and didn't bother to offer to share a hymnbook with them when their turn came. The kids didn't know what was going on, so the best singing we had all summer was when we sang "Jesus Loves the Little Children" or "O, How He Loves You and Me!" Most of the adults thought that was cute, but they never quite caught on that it had anything to do with them.

Laying down our life for others doesn't have to mean dying. Sometimes it means even harder things. Sometimes it means living together. Sometimes it means acknowledging that people who are different from us are God's people, too.

John comes down pretty hard on folks who give lip service to what faith requires of us, people who say they love Jesus, but turn away from anything or anyone they can't agree with, anyone who is different from them. He asks them flat out, and by extension, he asks all of us—how can you say you have the love of Christ in your heart and pass by someone in need? I know some of that need is not legitimate. It probably wasn't in John's day either, but what about what is?

You know how important it is that we bring groceries to church with us on this last Sunday of the month. June tells me again and again that even though contributions comes from all over town, it is the things that come from this church that keep that pantry afloat. It doesn't stretch most of us to pick up a little something extra when we're at the grocery store. The real issue is remembering to bring it when you come—so just bring it when you can whether it's MICA week or not. We'll get it there. I don't care how many stimulus checks go out or how many free meals

the schools can serve or how far the SNAP vouchers go, there will always be hungry children, senior adults, and people in between in our community. If we say we love Jesus, we know we can do something about that and we do.

John reminds us all that it is not enough to sit here in our pew and talk about how much we love this town and the people in it. If we do, we will continue to respond to the call of people like MICA and First Christian on Tuesdays in the winter and the Salvation Army when there is food to distribute or bells to ring or one of the shelters when there is heat to be paid for or cleaning to do or some way that we haven't been asked to help yet—not just because someone told us we should or we ought to, but because we know what love in action does. Someone loved us enough to provide for us and to move beyond words to action. Now we can do the same for others

One of the most important things we did while we were trying to organize a new church in Florida was to help a feeding program get started. Where we lived, you either lived on the Island or off. There had been a group on the Island feeding whoever showed up two or three nights a week for several years. A lady I didn't know stopped by the place where our church met one day and asked if I'd help her do a similar thing for people on our side of the Intercoastal Waterway. We found some space in a closed school—the old Home Ec kitchen, remember those? We got permission to use it, and then we started finding people to help us. We started out one night a week, on Thursdays. Our church and hers signed on first. Then others joined us. We grew from one night a week to three. Then four. I don't know how many nights they feed now. The recession claimed that church we tried to start ten years ago, but some of the people who were part of it still go out to the old high school and serve on the night that used to be ours. Chicken legs one week. Goulash the next. Spaghetti always goes over. They all go to church somewhere else now, but the love of Jesus told them to keep up what they started. Someday I'm going to surprise them and show up to help some Thursday. I'll be sure to bring food. Not because I should

or I ought to, but because the love of Jesus requires it. Thanks be to God that they know that, and we do, too. Amen.

Prayers of the People

God of Resurrection power, help us not to leave the power of Easter behind too quickly.

You raised Jesus from the dead to set us free from all that would hold us back from becoming what you know we can be, from all that prevents our knowing the fullness of life you want for us and for all your people. Help us to claim that power and to allow it to flow through us to a world and our own community in need.

We pray for your Church here and everywhere as we begin to emerge from this strange and weary year. Empower us to look forward more than back, to serve you faithfully in this new world in which we are learning to live, to become a place where wounds and fears are acknowledged, tended to, and healed. A place where all matter and no one is left behind.

We pray for the nations of the world. We pray for those areas that face shortages of vaccine while we have plenty to go around and to share. We pray for our own divisions and for the things that divide us from other nations. We face issues we have not faced before, and we are unsure about how to do that. Help us to follow those who lead us toward your will and to turn away from those who have other goals. Help us to create a world in which mercy is not an afterthought, but a dependable part of life for all of us. Help us to work toward a day when justice and peace prevail and no one is surprised when your will guides us and calls us to love and care for one another.

Help us to be agents of non-violence, people who strive to heal brokenness. Help us to live by your call, to love you with our whole being and to love each other as you love us. We believe, O God, that the future you want for us is just beyond our reach. Help us to reach farther until we achieve it.

We pray today for all we love and pray that you will expand that circle in spite of our effort to narrow it. Comfort all who suffer,

walk with us through dark days. Restore us in body, mind, and soul so that we can help other who need to be restored, too. Strengthen all who work day by day to heal the sick, to welcome the outsiders, and to help all who are in need here and everywhere.

Loving God, by the power of your Spirit at work among us, help us to hear and to do the things you call us to do not because we must, but because, by your grace, we can. Help us to love one another with the love with which you love us, the love of Jesus, who taught us all to pray when he said: *Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory for ever and ever. Amen*