

Sermon: May 3, 2009 Fourth Sunday of Easter Holy Communion
Scripture: Psalm 23; I John 3:16-24; John 10:11-18
Sermon Title: "Love in Action"

Call to Worship: Psalm 23 #170

Prayer of Confession: from: Whispers of God

O God, we have listened to voices other than yours and followed in paths of our own making. We have evaded your commandments to do what pleases us. Our hearts condemn us, but we lack the will and the strength to change our ways. Have mercy on us and forgive us, we pray, that we may devote ourselves to doing what pleases you, our God. We pray in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

Hymns: # 2103 We Have Come at Christ's Own Biding
#2132 Come, Ye Disconsolate (to be used during communion)
2241 The Spirit Sends Us Forth to Serve

Optional for use by Lay Leader

Call to Confession: Come in confidence that we will receive from God what we ask. The goodness and mercy of God are ours to claim. Let us bring our need for forgiveness and healing at this time of confession.

Assurance of Forgiveness: If we keep the commandments, we abide in God's love and God grants us the Holy Spirit as our guide and comforter. Surely God's goodness and mercy shall follow us all the days of our lives, and we will dwell in God's house forever. Amen.

Sermon: Love in Action

Christianity is an “Action Religion”. There are lots of folks who believe that the only thing you have to do to attain eternal life is say the right words, think the right thoughts and don’t do anything that offends God.

Well, one look at the life which Jesus of Nazareth lived ought to be enough to convince us that living a life which is in tune with God is not a matter of refraining from doing anything wrong. It is a matter of living a life that is proactive.

The story is told of the young preacher who graduated from Seminary and went out to the mountains of Kentucky for his first church. He was really on fire for The Lord. He preached his heart out for three years and plead with the dear members of that little mountain church to get out there and invite new families in. He ranted and raved from the pulpit about how important it was for that church to get involved in sending missionaries to foreign countries. He begged them to consider starting a “Matthew 25 Fund” to help their neighbors who had lost their jobs and could not afford food or medicine.

All to no avail. After three years of faithful preaching, there were no new members, the Elders had said “no” to helping to support a missionary and no one wanted to give a dime to help feed “those sorry neighbors who won’t work.” He was totally frustrated. So one Sunday morning he got up in the pulpit and simply asked how many of them wanted to be like Jesus.

Everyone’s hand shot up. “Good”, he commented. “Now, how many of you want to be like Jesus so bad that you’d be willing to do what He did.” This time not every hand went up. Finally he asked, “How many of you want to be like Jesus so much that you would be willing to copy Jesus’ lifestyle.” Only a few hesitant hands were raised and those weren’t very high. “You see,” he remarked sadly. “We all want to be like Jesus, but none of us want to do what Jesus did. We want The Glory, but we don’t want to do what it takes to get the Glory.” And with that he sat down. The sermon had taken less than two minutes.

But it was the most powerful sermon he had preached in his three years as pastor of that church.

At the close of the service one of the Elders shook his hand and asked if he could drop by the office to talk on Monday. The moderator of the Women

of the Church left church with her eyes cast down, unable to look the pastor in the eyes. A young couple with two kids in tow asked the pastor if he could find some time to drop by their house during the coming week. And a member of the church who had never made a pledge to the yearly budget asked the pastor to have lunch with him on Wednesday. The end result was that by the next Sunday there were five individuals who had agreed to meet once a week and talk about what their church could do to bring in new families, and they agreed to make a special gift once a month to support the mission work of their denomination, and finally they agreed to start a food pantry there at the church so the pastor help hungry families who came to the door of the church needing help. But most of all, they agreed to pray for each other and for the Spirit of God to open up the hearts of the members of that congregation. It was only a beginning, but at least it was a beginning. Five individuals came to understand that their faith was hollow unless it was coupled with acts of mercy and love. John understood this. He wrote to the Christians throughout Asia Minor.

We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us – and we ought to lay

Down our lives for one another. 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?

Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.

It is important that you and I renew our commitment to be like Jesus from time to time. It is a commitment that is difficult to fulfill, but even if we are successful only a little bit, the world around us is far better off than if we did not try at all. And yes, to be totally and completely like Jesus may mean that we also lay down our lives. For almost 2000 years now, many have done exactly that. In the face of overwhelming odds, they have stood firm in their faith and have died because of their unflinching faith. When the Moslem hoards entered Albania in 1901, millions of Christian villagers refused to give up their faith and were executed in the streets. When Hitler rounded up Jews to be sent to the concentration camps, loving and caring Christians hid Jewish children to keep them from the ovens. And when they were found with these children they too were executed. When Japan overran China in 1937 they rounded up Christian missionaries and confined them in camps where malnutrition and disease reduced their numbers to a fraction of what

they originally were. And today, Christian missionaries still function in places where death is a real live possibility. In the Sudan, Christians have been herded into their churches by tribal armies and those buildings have been set on fire. You do not have to live in the age of Joan of Arc to die for your faith. And it just may happen that this very modern age might see people of faith rounded up and martyred again.

But that is the extreme. Jesus willingly gave up his life. John writes:

For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. John 10:17-18

But I suspect that the kind of life we are called to is much more subtle. Living the life of Christ in the midst of our affluence. Being like Christ is not such a challenge when you are born into poverty and you are used to no shoes and sparse meals. The challenge comes when you live in the richest nation of the world, and you are a part of the economy that provides good education and warm homes and balanced meals and wonderful vacations in the mountains and/or the beach.

There are some who say that in order to be like Jesus we need to give up everything and become paupers. And certainly there have been some who have been able to do this down through the ages. That is truly a calling.

But you and I are called by God to be like Jesus in the midst of our worldly wealth. What did John write to the Christians in Asia Minor?

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 don't get the feeling that John wants us to become bums on the street. What good would that do? But what I feel John is saying is that our actions need to match the words of our mouths. That we need to use the wealth with which we are blessed to meet the needs of those who are less fortunate.

When I was called to Fellowship Presbyterian in Greensboro back in 1976, I had a family in the church that was extremely well off. They had made their wealth the old fashioned way. They had built a foundry and had been very

successful at it. I would often go out to the foundry and visit with Billy. Even though he had been successful, he loved nothing more than working out with the employees casting iron and aluminum into beautiful objects. His wife confided in me one day, "I believe God blessed us with wealth so we could use it for His glory." Both Billy and Zell are gone now, but their spirit lives on at Fellowship Presbyterian Church, in the new building they helped to inspire and support, in the mission program they loved and contributed to, and, in the heart and mind of a pastor to whom they ministered more often than I did to them.

Very simply put, God calls on us to use the blessings which come to us to bless others.

Think about that when you are asked to help stock the shelves of DAWN with canned goods.

Think about that when you are asked to support a home for battered women in Altavista.

Think about that when you have an opportunity to provide a campership to a kid who needs to go to summer camp, but whose parents cannot afford even to pay the gas to get him there.

Think about that when the call goes out for a special offering to support our missionaries in difficult countries.

Think about that when you hear about a family down the street who have lost their home because both mother and father have lost their jobs.

Think about what John wrote: let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.

And consider this important fact: Jesus did not love us in word alone, but in action.

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