

The Bold Lover

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Reading I John 3:16-24

I.

Remember my friend Richard Rose, pastor from Ithaca, New York, who preached at the installation service in this very room last fall? Years ago, when Rich and I were in a bible study together, we were looking at today's reading from the New Testament, and Rich remarked on how often he sees the phrase "John 3:16" at football games and in other public places. "I wonder what it would be like," quoth he, "if people took First John 3:16 as seriously as they do John 3:16!"

John 3:16 says: "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life." *First* John 3:16 comes not from the *Gospel* of John but from the first *Letter* of John. It reads: "By this we know love, that he [Christ] laid down his life for us; and we ought to lay down our lives for brothers and sisters." And then it continues: "But if anyone has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need, yet closes their heart against him or her, how does God's love abide in them? Little children, let us not love in word or speech but in deed and in truth."

This less familiar passage puts its emphasis not on *getting* life eternal but on *giving* sacrificially in love. It centers on love received from God and love shared with our neighbors. The evidence of the reality of that Love isn't words, it tells us, but our willingness to give up our treasures and even our lives. It invites us to be bold lovers—big hearted lovers of our neighbors, lovers of humanity.

The person who wrote these words understood very well that the biggest obstacle to *being* bold lovers is our self-doubt, even deep self-condemnation. We tend to put a lot of emphasis in Christianity on human sinfulness, pride and cruelty—and surely there is plenty of evidence in the world around us for these! Anyone can see much we human beings hurt each other, and fall short of doing good. But what we fail to reckon with is how often not badness but self-doubt, an internal sense of condemnation, that interior sense of being inadequate, keep us from loving other people, in real ways. How's that old blues song from the 70's go? "All those men you

been seein'...they can't even love you, they can't even love themselves." All of us find it hard to even love ourselves, let alone accept that God loves us. But Christ invites us, and the writer of First John invites us, to a healthy sense of confidence—boldness in love that starts in accepting our own goodness, our own worthiness.

Here is how Eugene Peterson, in his refreshing New Testament translation *The Message*, renders the words of First John: "My dear children, let's not just talk about love; let's practice real love. This is the only way we'll know we're living truly, living in God's reality. It's also the way to shut down debilitating self-criticism, even when there is something to it. For God is greater than our worried hearts and knows more about us than we do ourselves. And friends, once that's taken care of and we're no longer accusing or condemning ourselves, we're bold and free before God! We're able to stretch our hands out and receive what we asked for because we're doing what [God] said, doing what pleases [God]."

In other words, the best corrective to self-doubt is to trust that God knows us better than we know ourselves, loves us more than we love ourselves, and plunge right in boldly. Doing it, taking the risk, stepping out in faith, trusting that God's love as we learn it from Jesus is deep enough to give us what it takes: that's the cure for the paralysis of self-doubt and fear of our own failings.

II.

Loving our neighbors is where the pilgrimage of following Jesus goes from idea to reality: it is what allows the world—and us-- to see that God's love is real! It is the natural consequence of being loved that we turn and turn again to love some more. If we are so deeply loved by God, how can we keep from loving those around us? That love is costly, sometimes painful, but a precious, precious thing.

After reading First John again, I remember one of my first conversations I with my mother. I was three or four years old! Yet I remember like it was yesterday what she said. A little boy asked his mother, in the way a little child sometimes will: "What's GOD, Mommy?"

"God is love, Peter" was all she said. "God is love." I am not sure she knew or cared, but she was quoting from the same letter we are reading from today, First John 4:8. "Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love." (Good News Translation).

How do we learn love? The woman who said those words was largely responsible for my learning! And she did an amazing job of it. Not content to stop with words, she was a warm presence, a caring hand, a lovely smile, and a word of encouragement when it was most needed. I wish the whole world could have known such love. And she was unreserved in dishing it out.

Through long years of illness and pain, Ineke, my mother, offered this love not only to her children but to generations of students who came through her life, first in India, then in the US: mostly young men and women. And there were many more she shared this holy gift with, offering gracious hospitality to middle-aged scholars, away from their loved ones on the other side of the world, some outside their cultures for the first time. Then it was offering a listening ear to troubled youths on a hotline; offering tea to neighbors in need of counsel... And when she was ill herself, even in her final days, I would find the patient in her hospital bed listening sympathetically to her friends, pouring out their hearts. That was my mom. She taught us how to love, and she taught us that's what God is. Who taught you?

III.

Many of us have learned it from someone close, real love, the kind that shows up in simple acts that come from the heart, a readiness to share everything. Many others of us don't have it so easy—our childhoods were no picture postcards: we may have learned early to mistrust others, and even mistrust ourselves.

And yet we still have that capacity to love—love boldly in action and in truthful living—deep down within. If we have no one else, we have the stories of Jesus to teach us—someone who was willing to love us even at the cost of his life. Last year, following a prayer with our own Lily Chamberlain, I said to her: “Lily, you give amazing prayers. Who taught you to pray? Was it your mother?” She looked at me like I was crazy: “Jesus taught me how to pray.”

Several years ago, I met Beverly Jackson, a single mother with five young children who had moved back from Florida to Rochester New York, to the church where she was a member, and I was the new pastor. In those first months, Beverly had open heart surgery—she was about thirty years old.

The following year, in the midst of great controversy caused by a politician's remarks about welfare moms, Beverly did something rather astounding. She publicly invited County Executive Bob King, to come and stay with her family for a few days,

so that he could get a real sense of what the life of a family on public assistance was. I knew Beverly. I knew she was standing up for her children, for other moms, for people she felt were being unjustly stereotyped. Don't get me wrong. Beverly was angry. But her response was a genuine invitation. She was reaching out to the County Executive in love.

Mr. King declined. However a local TV station asked if they could take up the offer. A few days later the TV station did an in-depth report, including images of the children trying to mop out the wet basement and other substandard housing conditions.

The second day, the City of Rochester condemned the house, after someone saw the report on TV. And Beverly's family was forced into transitional housing.... The price for Beverly's act of love and conscience, at least for the short term, rather than entertaining the County official, was to lose their rental house.

Love is sometimes costly. Love sometimes has a cross. But real love is about actions—not any old actions, but actions which have integrity and truth, actions which stand up for the humanity of our children, ourselves, our neighbors.

I share this story with you this morning because we often think of Christian *discipleship* as something for famous people long ago, for extraordinary people. But more often it is about ordinary people in action, deeds of love which come from the heart, truth which is made manifest by inviting others to the table—even at very great cost. In the words of Claudia Highbaugh (*Feasting on the Word*, eds. Bartlett and Taylor, Year B Volume 2 p. 442) “*Speaking up and out for the good of the people is risky. Jobs, relationships, money, life are taken away when individuals take on a responsive and responsible activity for the good of the people—especially people in need.*”

The only force powerful enough, in my experience, to allow real people to undertake real risks like Beverly's angry but caring invitation of a stranger into her home—the only force powerful enough is Love.

IV.

If we abide in love, if we seek confidence not in our own heroism or insight or ability, but in the holy love we learn from God, then we discover we *are* capable of sharing the love, acting with integrity, giving the shirts off our back if necessary, even taking risks for the sake of truth, actions of which we might otherwise be incapable. Sometimes these deeds look small, sometimes they are profound.

Too often what holds us back is our fears, our doubt, our sense of guilt: troubled hearts. But faith in Christ says to us: let these things go! There is a Spirit capable of transforming our lives into an extraordinary banquet of God's love and a wonderful sharing of that love. God knows our hearts. God knows our weaknesses our bruises or brokenness. And God can heal these hearts, God can lead us into the paths of mercy and wonder and justice.

*Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil:
for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.
Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies:
thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life:
and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.*