ACTIVE LOVE

Easter 4 Year B

Acts 4:5-12; Ps. 23; 1 Jn. 3:16-24; Jn. 10:1-18 Gladstone 25/04 /2021

The great philosopher of our age, Tina Turner (who knew?), once asked the question:

*What’s love got to do, got to do with it?*

*What’s love but a second hand emotion?*

*What’s love got to do, got to do with it?*

*Who needs a heart when a heart can be broken?*

Tina Turner, as it turns out, hated this song. She hated it because it was anti-love—against everything she believed in. According to this song, the singer does not want any emotional attachment in her relationships. Love is just a pure physical attraction—calling it “a sweet, old-fashioned notion.” If you don’t love, then you can’t be hurt.

What’s love got to do, got to do with it? Well, if you want to live a Christian life, it has a lot to do, a lot to do with it. And I will get there shortly. But first a small detour, by way of a biblical illustration.

Now, all of you would understand that we are saved by faith—some would say: by faith alone. Faith, however, is never alone. John Calvin, the protestant reformer, said something similar. In the letter of James, the apostle says:

*14 What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? 15 If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, 16 and one of you says to them, “Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,” and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? 17 So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.*

*18 But someone will say, “You have faith and I have works.” Show me your faith apart from your works, and I by my works will show you my faith.*

And talking about Abraham, the author goes on to say…

***22****You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was brought to completion by the works.****23****Thus the scripture was fulfilled that says, “Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness,” and he was called the friend of God.****24****You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone.*

That last part might be a little controversial for some—but there it is—a debate for another day, perhaps. But it’s not ultimately what I want to talk about here.

What I *want* to say is, just as true faith is always accompanied by works (and by that I mean, you can’t separate them), so too is true love—whether it’s our love of God or our love for our family or our love for one another. Love, like faith, requires action. And it is this that defines a true Christian. “You say you love me/God/whatever. Don’t just tell me you love me, show me your love through your actions.

Way back when I was a teenager—way, way back—there was a song we used to sing at youth group: *Love is something you do*. Terrible song—great theology. Love *is* something you do. It’s not just a feeling—the feeling’s great—but in order to maintain it, you have to *do* something. You cannot say you love someone and simply leave it as a mental exercise. There’s another old chorus—and this may be more familiar to you: *You will know we are Christians by our love*.

So, what has all *that* got to do, got to do with our reading from the first letter of John, this morning? Well, this part of John’s letter answers that age old question: What does it mean to be a Christian?

This is how the Apostle sums up what God asks of us: ***23****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. (1 Jn. 3:23)*

Well, that doesn’t seem too hard, does it? Pretty simple? “Believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another.” There’s nothing there about having to read the Bible in a particular way or having a particular spiritual experience or holding particular views on politics, sexual ethics, or social policy, or even going to church. Just two things: believe in the name of God’s Son, Jesus Christ and love one another.

Well, I guess it’s possible that there may be a tendency to over-simplify the matter, just a teensy weensy bit, don’t you think? I suspect, as you may well do, that there just might be a little more to it. So, in order to avoid over-simplification, let’s try to unpack these two things a little bit.

To start with, let’s look at the relationship of these two things to what Jesus himself has said. You will recall that episode in John, chapter 3, where a pharisee by the name of Nikodemus, came to Jesus one night and asked a question, not too dissimilar to the one we’re looking at this morning: “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” In response, Jesus commented on the two most important things too, but he didn’t mention anything about believing in his own name. His second one was “love your neighbour as yourself”, so that sounds pretty similar to what John says, but what about the first. John has “believe in the name of God’s Son Jesus Christ” where Jesus had “love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, soul and strength.”

I want to suggest to you, this morning, that they are more or less the same thing, but obviously *that* needs some explanation here as well. Even if we were talking about the romantic kind of love, one of the most important questions is whether we are really in love with the person we think we are in love with, or are we really in love with some projection of who we imagine them to be. So it is with God. When I say I love God, the real question is whether I love God as God really is, or whether I love some other image of God which is quite different from who God actually is.

So when John talks about believing in the name of Jesus, what he is getting at is who God really is. Is the name Jesus Christ the pointer to who God really is? Does the God you love with all your heart, mind, soul and strength look exactly like Jesus? You see, it’s probably not that hard to love God in theory. If God is just some distant abstract concept, we can claim to love God without any sort of consequence. But when God starts doing things, and acting in certain ways, we either love what God does, or we don’t, and at that point we find out whether we really do love God or not. So, if Jesus is God showing us how God behaves and what God does, then our response to Jesus is where we find out what loving God is all about.

Which brings us to what we heard Jesus saying about himself in the gospel reading this morning. “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.” And he goes on to contrast that with the hired hand, who doesn’t really care about the sheep at all, but is just being paid to keep an eye on them, who in the event of any real danger like a wolf coming, runs off to save his own skin and leaves the sheep at the mercy of the wolf, who probably has no mercy at all.

Now, clearly Jesus is having something to say here about leadership styles as seen in the world around him, and I don’t think he’d be putting it too differently if he was talking in our world now. When there is real danger to be faced, how often do we see our leaders putting their own lives on the line? Not that often, is it? We don’t have to look far at all to see leaders who are willing to sacrifice *other* lives to achieve their objectives and protect their positions.

But Jesus is not only talking about leadership in the world around us. He is also challenging our concepts of what God is like. Most of the time, we are prone to imagining God in the image of those hired hand shepherds. We think of God as distant and uninvolved, not personally affected by the tragedies and conflicts that beset his sheep. And we think of God as one who would demand satisfaction in blood if his will is transgressed or his honour offended. “Sacrifice to me an unblemished lamb or you will all be made to pay.”

But Jesus says, “No! God is not like that.” God never demands or desires or condones the death of a single lamb, of his own flock, or any other. God is the *good* shepherd, the *true* shepherd, who would lay down his own life before ever allowing the wolf to get at the sheep and who would do whatever it takes to find and rescue even one lost sheep. As Jesus said, *“No one takes my life from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.”*

This then is his commandment, that we should believe in the name of God’s Son Jesus Christ, that we should see what this one does and know we are seeing God in action, and love such a God with all our heart, mind, soul and strength.

But this is not just about God and about those with positions of leadership. John says, *“We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us - and we ought to lay down our lives for one another.”* So this image of the good shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep is not just about God and leaders; it’s about all of us. All of us have responsibility for others, to look out for their interests, to care for their needs and their safety. This is where Jesus and John use almost identical words: “love one another.”

Note, here, that John does *not* say, you are to love *everyone*. Rather, he says that you are to love *one another*. Some of us may find that a bit strange. Are we not to love everyone—even our enemies? Well, yes, that’s true. There is no doubt that Jesus does extend the concept of loving our neighbour to include outsiders and even our enemies. But then there’s that risk again of falling into that same trap of loving an imagined distant someone, and failing to recognise the real someone in front of us. It’s easy to love everyone. It may not be that easy to love the person sitting next to you or the person you happen to disagree with.

The call to love one another begins with loving one another within the congregation because that’s actually where it’s hardest, precisely because that’s where it’s the most real. It’s not that hard to love some unknown group somewhere else, but would you want them living next door to you, with all their foibles and strange behaviours? And there is always the possibility that you *will* get hurt. Love costs us something.

Every one of us can think of some other one of us who makes loving one another an almost impossible challenge. And nearly every one of you just got thought of by someone else. And so did I. And that’s actually a big part of the point of being here. We’re not a natural grouping, united by similar social backgrounds, life experiences and interests. We are a motley group who fit only awkwardly together and who have only one thing in common—that we are called together in Christ to follow him in community and thereby learn to love one another.

There will be plenty of moments when the frictions and tensions in such a group as this get even more unbearable than usual, and we will be sorely tempted to behave in, shall we say, a little less than generous or Christian manner.

And as easily it is to think of someone that way, it’s just as easy for someone to think of you in that same way. The fact is, none of us specially deserve the right to be the loved and cherished and protected ones. We are all here on exactly the same basis: he (that is, Jesus) loves us and laid down his life for us and called us to follow and do the same for one another. *“This then is his commandment, that we should believe in the name of God’s Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us.”* Simple really. Just those two things. Perfectly simple. It’s putting it into practice that’s not so easy.

To God our Saviour and Christ our redeemer, be all glory, honour, majesty and power..

Why? Because he’s “simply the best. (You might say, “better than all the rest”). Amen.