

The Nature of Love
Fourth Sunday of Easter
May 3, 2009

1 John 3:16-24 ¹⁶ We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us-- and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. ¹⁷ 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? ¹⁸ Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action. ¹⁹ And by this we will know that we are from the truth and will reassure our hearts before him ²⁰ whenever our hearts condemn us; for God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything. ²¹ Beloved, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have boldness before God; ²² and we receive from him whatever we ask, because we obey his commandments and do what pleases him. 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. ²⁴ All who obey his commandments abide in him, and he abides in them. And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit that he has given us.

He's a big belligerent man with mental and emotional problems sufficiently extensive to place him under the care of a number of physicians, if he had the money and the inclination. But that's part of the problem: he has no money or any inclination of seeking assistance since everyone is trying to get his money and everyone else has something wrong with them. He's troubled by the way banks work because they steal his money by making intentional errors on the statement he withdraws from the ATM. On some of the slips he has shown me it appears there was a fee charged for checking on his balance; every time he looks it costs him in a number of ways. I suppose one could say we check his balance every time he rings the buzzer or steps inside the building, and it often costs him and us.

He was here last Sunday, full of bluster and certain someone had ripped him off again. I suspect someone had, or someone will. I think he often speaks the truth though it is hidden in the detritus of dementia. Once you've heard a preposterous story it is hard to treat anything as truth. I am certain whatever he says is true from his perspective, but his perspective is warped. Six months ago he gave me a \$100 bill because he believed he owed me the money. I told him anything he had received was a gift, not a loan. He clearly needed Benjamin Franklin to go with him. He got upset and told me to take the money, so I did. I added it to the benevolence account where a few withdrawals have been made for his benefit.

Last Sunday he became overdrawn at the account of tolerance. He was here at the end of the 11:00 service loud, aggressive and spoiling for a confrontation. He frightened a few folks, or at least made them uneasy. Ushers and others helped him from the building because nothing seemed to calm him down. Cameron tried to talk with him but rationality seldom works with someone who is irrational. His mind was made up; there was no room for discussion. The police were called and they came to help him with his decision to move along. No charges were pressed but he was told he could not return and harass people at the church.

How do we love one another?

We love our children and young people when we make sure the environment where they worship is safe and secure. We love them when we wrap our arms around them not only to give them hugs but to offer protection from the threats and dangers within society. We love them when we have nursery workers, education leaders, choir directors and other adults who spend

time with them to nurture and equip them for all that will come their way – including big belligerent people who suffer with mental and emotional illnesses.

We love our congregation when we make sure this is a safe and secure place, as safe and secure as it can be and still allow folks who walk in as strangers who might leave as friends. We lock the bottom door each Sunday at 11:15 since we have no idea who might enter the building and where they might go. During the week you sometimes have to push the buzzer so we know you are at the door and can see who you are or identify you by your voice so you can gain admittance. The doors should not be propped open for any length of time – especially at night. It isn't prudent, though our community is safe most of the time.

I suppose all of this makes sense, though I wish it didn't. I would rather live in Mayberry where a door is never locked. Each year the men go to Capon Springs for our retreat, a place where there are no locks on doors. It is a freeing feeling believing one is safe and secure without security measures. But I don't live in Mayberry, and the town drunks can become bellicose; Andy and Opie didn't deal with mental patients who had been prematurely released. The big belligerent man will not be kept off the streets by the commonwealth unless he is shown to be a danger to himself or others, which usually means he will have to hurt himself or others. Once he does something I hope and pray he won't do then help can be mandated rather than suggested. In a perverse way it makes it difficult to know for what one should hope and pray, other than to pray he get well, which isn't likely to happen if he receives no help.

How do we love one another? How do we lay down our lives for the big belligerent man? Are we supposed to lay down our lives for him?

One might die for a good person, Paul opined in Romans. It's easier to see we have a responsibility to love our spouse, our children, our family and friends, the folks here at church who we've known for a while, who share many of the same values and notions we share. One might have the courage and conviction to die for a cause or a commitment, like truth or freedom or nation. One might even sacrifice one's self for another not knowing exactly who the other is or what they believe or stand for. One might step in front of a car to save a child or anyone else who had the misfortune to be in the way. But if one knew a big belligerent mentally ill man who regularly frightened folks was in danger, would one's response be different?

I suppose it is far easier to speculate, to use words about what love might or might not mean, than to use deeds as an indication. Let us love not in word or speech but in truth and action. If we have the world's goods and see a sister or brother in need and refuse help, how is that love, Paul asks. Since most all of us

have more of the world's goods than we need what are we to do when we are constantly surrounded by people in need? I don't say this to heap guilt on anyone. Guilt is a poor motivator and rarely brings about transformation. Guilt's not the point, at least not to me. How are we to love one another? That's the pointed question.

Believe in the name of Jesus Christ, Paul writes, which truly means far more than I think it usually means today. One's name is the sum of one's character, a verbal shorthand version of the totality of the person. To believe in Jesus' name is not simply to acknowledge who he is or to declare one's allegiance to him. To believe in Jesus' name is to identify with him, to live as he lived, to trust as he trusted, to hope as he hoped, to persist as he persisted, to believe as he believed, to love as he loved. Have this mind in you which was also in Christ Jesus, Paul wrote to the church in Philippi. That's far closer to what it means to believe in the name of Jesus Christ.

Jesus loves us, and we are to love one another. No rules or regulations are offered, no boundaries drawn. That's up to us, I think, and we seldom get it right and often wonder about what we have done. I wonder about the big belligerent man, though I believe we have done what we can do. We want the church to be safe, and we want the church to welcome everyone, and there will always be a struggle about what that means and who it involves.

Love is always incomplete. There's always more to give, more to consider, more to embrace and more to offer. I suspect I hold back more than I think. Perhaps we all do. When our hearts question and condemn us we are encouraged by the notion God is greater than our hearts and knows everything, which means God knows our motives, our intentions, our mistakes, and our character. I find that notion simultaneously frightening and reassuring.

When I encounter the big belligerent man on the street I'll tell him once more the bank isn't stealing his money. I'll listen to him tell me once more of his days as an attorney. I'll walk away when he becomes angry with me for not agreeing to all he says. I'll believe we did the right thing by telling him not to return to the church grounds. I'll wonder what else we could do. My heart will uneasily be at ease.

That's often the nature of love.