

April 26

Scripture: I John 3:16-24

Sermon: Love is a Verb

Love is a Verb. That is the title to a book, a movie and even a song. So it seems to be a common sentiment but one that we do not always understand. The idea of love being a verb harkens back to this passage in I John that says, "Let us not love with words or speech but with action and truth" Today I want us to explore what it means to say "Love is a verb."

When I mention the word "love" what pops into your mind? I am guessing that you are thinking about ideas such as romance, a first kiss, or feeling weak in the knees. We talk about falling in and out of love. When we think of the term "love" normally emotions or emotional responses are what come to mind. So we know John is talking about something more than a feeling. For him it is a call to action. John even goes so far to say that it is more than words that you say. All of us want to hear our beloved say "I love you." For John, those words, "I love you" are meaningless unless they are backed up by actions. When Love becomes a verb we begin to have a specific way of dealing with and relating to others that is real and authentic. Acting in this way causes the words of love to begin to have real meaning and power. Let's see how this works.

John believes love is a set of specific actions that we initiate towards others because of our faith in Jesus and because we are striving to follow his teachings and examples. This idea of love is action is in keeping with thoughts from the Old Testament. Let me give you just one example. All of us love Psalm 23. It begins, "The Lord is my shepherd and I lack nothing." (Common English Bible Translation). The psalmist then goes on to share all the ways God surrounds him with goodness. These include guidance, protection, and blessings enough to overflow the cup of our lives. We know we are loved because God acts towards us in specific ways. God doesn't just have warm thoughts about us. God takes care of us. For God, love is a verb. This was an idea that Jesus shared many, many times. When challenged about healing on the Sabbath, Jesus chastises the questioner for being more concerned about rules than

about people in need. Jesus shares parables that emphasize this idea like, if you are at the altar ready to make your offering and find you have a complaint against someone leave it and go make restitution first, or in the parable of the sheep and the goats - those that were blessed were those who saw a need and did something about it. He says that anyone can say "Lord, Lord" but only those who do the will of God's will enter the kingdom. We could just as easily say, anyone can say, "I love you and so does God" but without deeds, it means nothing.

Today I want us to see John's ideas of how love is a verb. I am sure you can think of many other ways to live out this idea. He begins with the most challenging idea of all. We are called to lay down our lives for another. It is rare for us to have to even contemplate being a martyr for our faith but let me give you some other ways we might lay down our lives for others. I think of the man who volunteered to drive his neighbor to visit his wife at a care facility. He promised to do it three times a week. He was sure that the wife would not last very long. It ended up being a more than five year commitment. He did it faithfully, giving up time in his life for his friend for all those years. I just read how former President Jimmy Carter has severed ties with the Southern Baptist church. President Carter has become a part of a group calling themselves "The Elders." The Elders is an independent group of global leaders who work together for peace and human rights. They were brought together in 2007 by Nelson Mandela. One of the focuses of this group is the empowerment of women. Jimmy Carter explains why he is divorcing himself from the Southern Baptist Convention after six decades as a deacon and Sunday School teacher.

"It was, however, an unavoidable decision when the convention's leaders, quoting a few carefully selected Bible verses and claiming that Eve was created second to Adam and was responsible for original sin, ordained that women must be "subservient" to their husbands and prohibited from serving as deacons, pastors or chaplains in the military service."

It's easy, in the daily course of events, to forget how pervasive such judgments against the equality of women really are, especially as we have examples of powerful women in political office and business. But just as having a black president doesn't solve racial

inequities, neither do a handful of high-profile women indicate there isn't an ongoing struggle for parity among millions of other women without such power.” He goes on to say he could not be one of the Elders and also a member of his church.

So we need to see that we still face challenges to being faithful that cause us to give up much, if we are to be faithful. It isn't our lives but it is still a sacrifice and doing this is making love a verb.

John continues to challenge us by saying basically, if we have stuff and see someone without we are to share. We want excuses and exemptions. But then we remember Jesus' parable about the sheep and goats and its reminder as well that when we see needs we are to try and meet them. What this means for each individual will be different. We know on a philosophical level that Jesus and John do not expect us to become impoverished trying to take care of the world. We also know that we could be doing a lot more than we are doing without it inconveniencing us very much, if at all. We realize that if love is to be a verb we are challenged to be more generous than we might do on our own. We need to set up patterns of living that foster a spirit of caring and help. I recall reading about a woman who decided that if she had not worn an item in six months she needed to donate it to a center that provided good quality clothes for women who were going for job interviews. She admitted that in the beginning it was hard to give things away. She kept thinking that maybe I will wear it later. But then she thought about what this dress or skirt could mean for another. Now, when it comes to her six month review of her closet she doesn't give away as much because of earlier purges so she has also decided that whatever she spends on clothes she will donate the same amount to that center. She owns less but feels good about what she owns. A spirit of generosity that sees everyone as a brother or sister, where we are willing to help, is our goal.

The next thing that he mentions surprises me a bit. For him this active loving also means living truthfully. I had to think about this for a bit. For John, God is truth and so we must live as truthfully as we can if we are to be God's children. This is how we show we love God. So what is truthful living? It is more than just telling the truth though I am sure that is part of it. I would put it differently. I would say it is living authentically. When

we say we are a Christian that means we should act and live certain ways. John ends with talking about keeping God's commandments so we know that this is in his thinking. But more than just following the rules, it is living as we know God would want us to live. We know God expects us to be generous, to be forgiving and to be willing to sacrifice for others. As we live into these experiences and they become a part of who we are, this is living truthfully, authentically, becoming one who knows and loves God. Again I go back to the parable of the sheep and the goats. Those rewarded said, "When did we see you...?" The spirit of caring was so much a part of them that they no longer thought about it as being special or deserving recognition. This is living our faith authentically and loving not just in words but in actions.

So, how truthfully are you living your faith? When you look at your life and the choices you made, without even thinking about them but just out of habit, are you proud of what you see? Would you be willing to stand before God on the record of those choices? Those are the questions we need to ask.

Finally, John reminds us that we are to keep God's commandments. When Jesus was asked to summarize the commandments he said that the most important is to love God completely and to love others as we love ourselves. This again completes the circle. We began with being challenged to love and we are reminded that loving others is a way to love God and a way of following God's commands. It is a deliberate set of actions. It makes love a verb instead of an emotion. So challenge yourself to be loving following Jesus' example today and every day.