

THIS IS LOVE – THAT JESUS HAS LAID DOWN HIS LIFE FOR US
Sermon for the 4th Sunday of Easter (Good Shepherd Sunday) 2021
1 John 3:16-24

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today is our Second Reading from before, 1 John 3:16-24: ¹⁶ **This is how we know love: He has laid down His life for us. We also ought to lay down our lives for our brothers.** ¹⁷ **If anyone has this world's goods and sees his brother in need but shuts his heart against him, how does the love of God remain in him?** ¹⁸ **Little children, let us not only love in words or in talk but in deeds and in truth!** ¹⁹ **This is how we shall know that we belong to the truth and how we shall assure our hearts before Him:** ²⁰ **For whenever our hearts condemn us, God is greater than our hearts and knows everything.** ²¹ **Dearly loved people, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have confidence before God** ²² **and receive from Him whatever we ask for, because we keep His Commandments and do the things that are pleasing in His sight.** ²³ **This is also His Commandment, that we should believe in the name of His Son, Jesus Christ and love one another as He has commanded us.** ²⁴ **He who keeps His Commandments remains in God, and God remains in him. This is also how we know that He remains in us: by the Spirit, whom He has given to us.**

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

In one way or another, everybody loves. Even the worst people in history loved. But here's the thing: on our own, most of the time, the object of our love is *self*. When we love something, generally, it's because it brings us pleasure. When we hate someone or something, generally, it's because it is a threat to us. But is a love of self really love at all?

The apostle John wrote in verses just before our text, ¹¹ *For this is the message that you have been hearing from the beginning: that we should love one another.* ¹² *We should not be like Cain, who belonged to the Evil One and murdered his brother. Why did he murder him? Because his works were evil and his brother's works were righteous* (3:11-12). Cain loved, but the object of his love was himself. His brother Abel received recognition from God, and out of jealousy and love of self, Cain murdered his brother. His love of self showed itself as hate toward Abel. The message that we have been hearing from the beginning is that we should love one another... but we don't.

Another example of failed human love is in Jesus' description of the religious leaders of His day: those who were motivated more by self-interest than care for the sheep. Jesus had taught, *"When the hired man, who is not the shepherd and who does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming, he leaves the sheep and runs away, and the wolf catches them and scatters them.* ¹³ *He runs away because he is a hired man and does not care about the sheep"* (John 10:12-13). Their true love was not directed to those whom God had given them to care for, but rather their love was directed inward to themselves.

Remember, *"this is the message that you have been hearing from the beginning: that we should love one another."* To "love one another" is not some peripheral, optional teaching in Christianity but is central to the New Testament message. Shortly after the first Lord's Supper, Jesus uttered His majestic "new commandment" that His disciples should love one another so much that it would be evident to everyone that they were His disciples¹. How sad it is that often we do not love as we ought.

The Law repeatedly proves that we are more like Cain and the hired hands than we would like to admit. And if we're honest, what did love of self do for Cain and the false teachers? It led Cain to a fear of God that saw no hope and led to his lonely exile and rejection from others. Where did it lead the religious leaders of whom Jesus spoke? It led them to fear enemies and to actions for the sake of *self-preservation*. Their love of self also led to fear of God, without hope, and to self-imposed exile. Love of self really does no good for anyone, not even for us. We need something other than the love of self.

The message of Easter reveals a different kind of love. It is a love that has "the other" as the object of its affection. It

¹ John 13:34-35

is a love that lays down one's life for the sake of the other. It is a love that is confident and unafraid because it lacks nothing. It is not motivated by fear of loss, but rather, it recognises that it has received everything, and so it freely gives.

Contrasting self-love with the love that we learn from God, John writes, **“This is how we know love: He has laid down His life for us.”** This is really something if you think about it. People tell us that we have to *earn* their respect. We understand that we have to *earn* our pay. When people tell us that they love us, it's often followed by “because,” and that word is usually accompanied by something we did. For example, “I love you because you are always there for me.” Or, “I love you because you are such a good friend.” This is not wrong, and when we hear words like that, we feel good that we have brought something good to someone else's life.

However, John is not talking about a love that we have earned. Did we deserve to have God lay down His life for us? No! The love that God has made known is far different from any other love. In his Letter to the Romans Paul wrote, *“...because the love of God has been poured out into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to us. ⁶ For, while we were still helpless, at the set time Christ died for ungodly people... God shows His own love for us by this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us... while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son”* (Romans 5:5-6, 8, 10). Do you want to know if God loves you? Then look at what He has been willing to do for us all. When we were not just weak and “helpless” but “ungodly” - sinners actively opposed to Him, Christ has died for us. That is God's one-way love in action. It is the love that allows Paul to say that God is a God who *“justifies the ungodly”* (Romans 4:5). That, dear friends, is true love.

Furthermore, Jesus gives this love willingly. We heard Jesus say earlier in our Gospel, *“I am the Good Shepherd. The Good Shepherd lays down His life for the sheep... No one takes [My life] from Me, but I lay it down of My own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it back again”* (John 10:11, 14, 15, 18). Jesus has laid down His life and has taken it up again for us. This is the message of Easter: **“This is how we know love.”**

We receive and know this love every time we gather around our Good Shepherd in the Word and Sacrament. Jesus says, *“Take, eat; this is My body, which is given for you... Take and drink; this is My blood which is shed for you.”* Here Jesus gives us His love; here is where we receive it. His love, which was first poured out on us richly in our baptism², and continues to be received by us in His Supper. Moreover, in the Absolution, He unflinchingly reveals to us that His love has covered even the sins that bring us guilt and shame. And by His same love, that guilt and shame are removed. All of this is made possible because *He has laid down His life for the sheep and taken it up again*. Lent and Easter get at the heart of how we know love.

John lets us know that this love cannot be contained by those who receive it. If a person receives Jesus' love, he must love others. He writes, **“We also ought to lay down our lives for our brothers. ¹⁷ If anyone has this world's goods and sees his brother in need but shuts his heart against him, how does the love of God remain in him? ¹⁸ Little children, let us not only love in words or in talk but in deeds and in truth!”** Jesus Christ's magnificent self-sacrifice on Calvary's cross has not only bought for us the forgiveness we needed to be God's children again but also inspires us to love and forgive people in our lives. Jesus' parable of the unmerciful servant in Matthew 18³ shows the comparative size of the debts we owe and are owed. What a joy it is to honour Christ by showing compassion and love to other people! His sacrifice is the motivating fire that drives all we do.

This does not mean that we shall be sinless, and no one should look to his own actions to assure himself that he's going to heaven. Not at all, but if we notice that we are not letting God's love have its way with us, meaning that our love for others has failed, then we return to God's love in Christ. For that is where we know love, and that is where we find the source of our love for others. It is because Jesus has laid down His life for us that we have the ability to lay down our lives for others.

In verse 23 of our text, John writes, **“This is also His Commandment, that we should believe in the name of His Son, Jesus Christ and love one another as He has commanded us.”** As Lutherans, we have always understood that obedience to God's commandments *begins* with the Father's love for us in Jesus. Jesus has united us to Himself in baptism and has thereby connected us with the greatest act of love the universe has ever known, namely, Jesus' death

² Titus 3:6

³ Matthew 18:21-35

and resurrection for the forgiveness of sin.⁴ Moreover, Jesus continues to grant us this same love in His Supper. And upon receiving the Supper, we often pray, “*We give You thanks almighty God, that You have refreshed us through this healing gift, and we pray that through it You would graciously strengthen us in faith toward You, and in love toward one another.*”

You see, we understand that “we should love one another,” and in the prayer after the Lord’s Supper, we recognise that the source of our love for others and faith toward God begins with knowing Jesus’ love for us. “**This is how we know love: He has laid down His life for us.**” Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

PRAYER FOR THE FOURTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

Lord our God, we praise You for Your great goodness; and for the good things that You have prepared for those who love You! Grant that we may obtain those glories, which no human being has ever seen or heard or ever thought could happen, through Jesus Christ, Your holy Servant.

We thank You for sending Christ, the Good Shepherd, into our world, to lay down His life for the sheep, to pay the price of His blood to free us from the power of Satan, from the deserved results of our sins, and from the lifelong fear of death. We praise You also for His triumphant resurrection, and for the glorious promise that all who listen to His voice and follow Him will receive eternal life.

We thank You for His pity and love for us, who were straying and helpless like sheep without a shepherd, but who are now through Your great mercy brought back to fellowship with the true Shepherd and Keeper of our souls. We thank You For Your gracious forgiveness for all our sins, for Your promise of peace, for Your assurance of salvation, for Your presence and power in our lives, and for every gift in Christ Jesus.

Enable us, by Your grace, to follow the example of Jesus, our Saviour and Head, by seeking the lost, lifting up the fallen, strengthening the weary, rescuing the straying, feeding the poor, helping the suffering, sheltering the homeless, and being sensitive to each other’s needs. May we thereby proclaim Your praises for calling us out of darkness into Your marvellous light.

Give us the voice and leadership of Jesus the Good Shepherd in all parliaments and councils of the nations, in commerce and industry, in all civic and social life. Guide and direct more people to You, so that our nation may stop its continued slide into immorality and unbelief.

Direct our way through the sin, strife, and uncertainty of this age, O Lord. Give us true faith and godly hearts. Strengthen the sick, cheer the depressed, and supply the needy, showing that You are always ready to help in every trouble. Because our eyes have seen Your salvation, when our last hour comes, release Your servants in peace, and receive us into everlasting glory; through Jesus Christ Your Son, our risen Lord and Saviour. Amen.

FOURTH SUNDAY OF EASTER (GOOD SHEPHERD SUNDAY)

Acts 4:1-12

¹ While Peter and John were speaking to the people, the priests, the captain of the Temple and the Sadducees approached them. ² They were extremely annoyed because Peter and John were teaching the people and preaching in Jesus the resurrection of the dead. ³ They laid their hands on them and put them in custody until the next day. For it was already evening.

⁴ However, many of those who had heard the Word had become believers, and the number of the men grew to about five thousand. ⁵ On the next day, their rulers,

elders and scribes assembled in Jerusalem. ⁶ Annas the High Priest, Caiaphas, John and Alexander were there and all the other members of the High Priest’s family. ⁷ They made the two men stand in the middle and began to ask, “By what power or by what name have you done this?”

⁸ Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, replied to them, “Rulers of the people and elders! ⁹ If we are being examined today because of a good deed that we have done to a crippled man, by what means he has been made well, ¹⁰ let it be known to you all and to all the people of Israel, that by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God has raised

⁴ Romans 6:3-4

from the dead, by Him this man is standing here before you in good health! ¹¹ This is ‘the Stone that was rejected by you builders, which has become the Cornerstone.’ ¹² There is also salvation in no one else. For there is no other name under heaven that has been given among human beings by which we must be saved.”

1 John 3:16-24

¹⁶ This is how we know love: He has laid down His life for us. We also ought to lay down our lives for our brothers. ¹⁷ If anyone has this world’s goods and sees his brother in need but shuts his heart against him, how does the love of God remain in him? ¹⁸ Little children, let us not only love in words or in talk but in deeds and in truth! ¹⁹ This is how we shall know that we belong to the truth and how we shall assure our hearts before Him: ²⁰ For whenever our hearts condemn us, God is greater than our hearts and knows everything. ²¹ Dearly loved people, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have confidence before God ²² and receive from Him whatever we ask for, because we keep His Commandments and do the things that are pleasing in His sight. ²³ This is also His Commandment, that we should believe in the name of His Son, Jesus Christ and love one another as He has commanded us. ²⁴ He who keeps His Commandments remains in God, and God remains in him. This is also how we know that He remains in us: by the Spirit, whom He has given to us.

John 10:11-18

¹¹ “I am the Good Shepherd. The Good Shepherd lays down His life for the sheep. ¹² When the hired man, who is not the shepherd and who does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming, he leaves the sheep and runs away, and the wolf catches them and scatters them. ¹³ He runs away because he is a hired man and does not care about the sheep. ¹⁴ I am the Good Shepherd and I know My own, and My own know Me, ¹⁵ as the Father knows Me, and I know the Father and lay down My life for the sheep. ¹⁶ I also have other sheep, which are not in this fold. I must also lead them, they will listen to My voice, and there will be one flock and one Shepherd. ¹⁷ The reason why the Father loves Me is that I lay down My life, that I may take it back again. ¹⁸ No one takes it from Me, but I lay it down of My own accord. I have authority to lay it down and have authority to take it back again. This command I have received from My Father.