

The Heartbeat of a Christian

1 John 3:16-24

Did you know that your heartbeat is completely unique? Every person on earth has a different heartbeat pattern, or “cardiac signature.” Your cardiac signature cannot be altered or disguised. So, if someone can measure your “cardiac signature,” they can identify you, even in a big crowd of people. Did you ever imagine that your physical heartbeat—your cardiac signature—could be so distinctive? Now, let’s apply that to our faith,

Our scripture lesson for this morning makes that clear. The heartbeat of the Christian is to love others with the sacrificial love of Jesus. Not a warm and fuzzy feeling. Not with good intentions or encouraging words. But with loving actions. Actions that cost us something. As verse 18 reads, “. . . let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth.” Real love is costly.

This passage was written to encourage people to be more loving toward one another and to those in need. If we can’t do that, John tells us, we’ve missed the very heart of the faith that Christ gave us.

The toughest thing God ever had to do is to get us to understand who God is and that God loves us. How did God get us to understand who God is? First through the Law and the prophets. And then through coming to us in the flesh, in the person of Jesus Christ. And how did God get us to understand that God loves us? By giving God’s Son to die on the cross and rise again to save us from the penalty of sin and death.

John, who wrote these verses, knew that if he didn’t make it perfectly clear what Christian love looks like, we would try to define it for ourselves. He doesn’t give us that option. In verse 16, he writes, “This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters.”

The essence of Christian faith is love. Listen to some selected words from this chapter: “Behold, what manner of love God has bestowed upon us, that we should be called the children of God . . . For this is the message that you heard from the beginning, that we should love one another . . . This is how we know that God loves us, because Jesus laid down his life for us: and we ought to lay down our lives for one another . . . Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.” Friends, that’s the Gospel. Unfortunately, it’s not always easy to love, is it?

Many years ago, Jeffrey Collins was director of a nonprofit group called Love & Action. This is an organization that ministers to AIDS patients and their families.

Collins tells of receiving a phone call at five o’clock on a Friday afternoon as he was trying to leave the office. Collins had just worked a sixty-hour week. He was exhausted and wanted to ignore the phone. But he answered it anyway.

The voice on the other end of the line was Jimmy, a client of Love & Action. Jimmy was very sick and very scared. Collins confesses that his first emotion when he answered the call wasn’t compassion, but anger. He really wanted to go home and rest. He wanted a couple of hours at the end of the week when no one needed him. Many of you know exactly what that’s like. But Collins knew that God’s calling isn’t dependent on how we feel, but on how badly someone else needs our help. So, Jeffrey Collins headed over to Jimmy’s house to check on him.

Jimmy was on the sofa, shivering and feverish and covered in vomit. The smell was horrible. Though he was very careful not to show it, Jeffrey’s anger and annoyance grew. As he knelt and scrubbed vomit out of the carpet surrounding the sofa, Jeffrey prayed an angry prayer to God. But here’s what came out of that experience.

A friend of Jimmy's named Russ came in to find Jeffrey kneeling beside the sofa cleaning up Jimmy's vomit. With an astonished look on his face, Russ said, "I understand! I understand!" "What Russ?" Jimmy asked weakly. What do you understand? "I understand who Jesus is," Russ said through tears. "He's like Jeff!"

That night, Jeffrey prayed with Russ as Russ committed his life to following Jesus. Despite Jeffrey's resentment, his loving actions brought another young man to Jesus.

It isn't always easy to love. We tend to withhold love until someone passes our "approval test." We love those who we think are deserving of our love—which is exactly the opposite of Jesus' love. Christ didn't love us because we were easy to love, or we deserved it. Christ loves us with the very love of God.

Just as Christ laid down his life for us, we should be willing to lay down our lives for others. That means loving all people—even those who misuse us, and that means doing good to all people—even those whom we may not approve of, and that means leaving our comfort zone from time to time for acts of extraordinary concern. The essence of Christian faith is love.

That brings us to something else that is important for us to realize. Love is our primary witness to the world. How will the world know we're Christians? By our love. If the day comes when the Christian church is as loving as its Master, the world will beat a path to our door. John asks, "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 to help?" It doesn't.

Love is more than just an emotion or a feeling. Love is feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting the sick and imprisoned. Love is not a passive verb, but an active one. And it is the primary way we share Christ with the world.

Love is our primary witness to the world. As the saying goes, "People don't care how much we know until they know how much we care." But there's one thing more that we need to see.

Love is a gift from God. There's a bumper sticker that reads: "Perform an unnatural act—love somebody." And it's true. Pure love is not an attribute of humanity, but of God. Our nature is to strive for survival, to strive for our own well-being. God's nature is self-giving love. The closer we are to God, the better able we are to love others. John writes, "And by this we know that God abides in us, by the Spirit that God has given us." That Spirit is love.

Love is a gift God gives to us. And it is multiplied and magnified when we can give it away, when we can love others with the same sacrificial love that God showed to us.

In the face of persecution and injustice and torture and humiliation, Jesus faced his death with courage and grace, even forgiving the men who hung him on the cross. And he willingly suffered his awful fate to show us how far God would go to prove God's love for us.

The words John wrote centuries ago are still true for us today, "And this is God's commandment, that we should believe in the name of God's Son, Jesus Christ and love one another, just as God commanded us." When the love of God truly abides in our heart, we can look into the faces of others and see God's face.

Love is the essence of Christian faith. Love is our primary witness to the world. Love is a gift from God. We love because God first loved us. Only as we abide in God can God's love abide in us.