

Philippians 2:3,4

*Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of others.*

Devotion 11 October – 1 John 3:16-19: LOVE IN ACTION

Parts of what I will share with you come from a sermon by Jo Anne Taylor. Jo Anne is a singer, a teacher and a preacher currently serving a United Methodist Congregation in the United States.

*The young woman stood in the doorway, looking embarrassed. I hadn't seen her in nearly a year. As I looked up her records from the last time she had come to ask for help, I hoped I had made some notes about her story that would jog my memory. When I found her papers in my Emergency Assistance file, my heart sank.*

*A few months after I began this appointment, I set a limit on how many times any person could receive vouchers for food and gas, and she had already met that limit.*

*At the time, setting a limit seemed the right thing to do. I had come to realize that several people had let the church become part of their monthly income stream. What we gave them couldn't really be called "emergency assistance" anymore, because it had become part of their regular budget. They spent what income they received from other sources on entertainment instead of groceries, because they knew they could get groceries through the church.*

*Maybe I was being too judgmental, but I didn't think it was good stewardship to use our emergency assistance fund to support poor lifestyle choices. So I set a limit. Three times, and you're done. I figured someone who was really experiencing a temporary financial emergency would not need help for more than three months in a row. Ninety days ought to be enough time to get back on track. People who kept coming back time and time again needed more than a voucher for groceries. They needed an entire life transformation. If they wanted to come talk with me about faith, my door was open. But my voucher file was closed.*

*And now, here this woman stood, near tears, desperate for whatever I could offer her. She'd tried everything she knew, and I was her last hope. It had been nearly a year since she'd been in my office. Couldn't I do something?*

When Jesus was teaching and healing during the early part of his ministry, there were times when the needs around him seemed overwhelming, too. We see this time and

time again. In Matthew's gospel we read, "When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd" (Matthew 9:36), and we remember that Jesus is our good shepherd, willing to lay down his life for us, the sheep of his flock.

The passage I have chosen to continue the focus that Daniel introduced on Friday that demonstrates the 'others-centredness of Jesus' echoes these words from the gospel, but John calls us to be more than simple sheep when we choose to follow Jesus.

*1 John 3:16-19 states: <sup>16</sup>We know what real love is because Jesus gave up his life for us. So, we also ought to give up our lives for our brothers and sisters. <sup>17</sup>If someone has enough money to live well and sees a brother or sister<sup>[a]</sup> in need but shows no compassion—how can God's love be in that person?*

*<sup>18</sup>Dear children, let's not merely say that we love each other; let us show the truth by our actions. <sup>19</sup>Our actions will show that we belong to the truth, so we will be confident when we stand before God.*

As the themes over the last few years continue to weave themselves together, in this passage John moves toward something that he wants to make clear and it is this: that there is only one thing you need to believe – Jesus is God's Son, and you can tell that he loves you because he laid down his life for you. Now go show that kind of love to each other by showing your LOVE BY YOUR ACTIONS.

So how exactly, are we supposed to lay down our lives for each other? Does he mean we need to die for one another, just as Jesus did? How will our dying for each other prove anything? What is it that John is telling us about love, faith, and obedience?

In 1 John 3:16, John tells us without a shadow of doubt what real love is. He says, "*We know what real love is because Jesus gave up his life for us. So, we also ought to give up our lives for our brothers and sisters.*"

When Jesus died on the cross to save us from our sins, he went all out. He held nothing back but sacrificed his own life for our sakes. John's point is that we need to be so committed to sharing God's love that we are willing to give our entire being to that purpose. Romans 12:1 says "*And so dear brothers and sisters, I plead with you to give your bodies to God. Let them be a living and holy sacrifice ...*"

Our lives are to be "a living sacrifice", with all the attention we would normally give to satisfying our own desires redirected toward loving each other.

“Laying down our lives” may mean sacrificing busy schedules that keep us too occupied to notice another’s need. Laying down our lives might mean setting aside our own personal agenda, so that we can be part of someone else’s life, and invite them to be part of ours. Laying down our lives could be taking the time to listen to someone who is hurting. Laying down our lives isn’t so much about dying for someone else, as it is living for someone else, putting their needs ahead of our own as an act of love.

And then John gets real in verse 17 where he says ... *“If someone has enough money to live well and sees a brother or sister in need but shows no compassion—how can God’s love be in that person?”*

That woman who came to Jo Anne’s door, looking for help, wouldn’t be unique in most places where assistance can be given. There would be dozens just like her every month I’m sure. People who have reached the end of their rope, and the knot they tied in the end of it so they would have something to hang onto; has come unravelled. They are slipping. They are “harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.” This story reminds me of Dale and Donna Dowler who run The Shack in Nambour. What kind of stories could they tell when looking at this scripture?

There would be many times that they could not help them any further. People who need a place to live, or the electricity has been shut off. Their only car has broken down. Their needs are overwhelming, and they are always urgent. What would Dale and Donna do? What would Jesus do?

Jo Anne went on to share the following which is challenging in many ways ... *While I know that some of the people who come to me have made up a story they think will gain my sympathy, and some of those stories are so obviously untrue I have a hard time keeping a straight face as I listen to them, I also know that some of the heartbreaking stories I hear are very true. I know because I’ve already read about them in the newspaper.*

*And while I know that many of the people who come to me for help are only there because they have made really poor choices, I also know that some of the people who come to me are truly victims of circumstance. They’ve been living by the skin of their teeth for so long, they don’t know any other way to live. When a catastrophe strikes, they have no reserves, no way to handle it without some help.*

Here is the challenging part ... *What’s the best way for those of us who have plenty to help others in need – not only material needs, but the deeper layers of need that cause brokenness and pain, that send people into a cycle of poverty? How can we invest ourselves in their lives, and share our lives with them to meet the deepest need of all: to know Christ and follow him?*

We know that offering a voucher for groceries or petrol does very little to solve the root problems of poverty and hunger. Poverty of spirit is a greater need than financial poverty, but sometimes the two are very closely related. Sometimes – hard as it may sound – the most sacrificial, loving thing we can do is refuse to settle for putting a band-aid on the problem. Sometimes saying “no” to a request is the most loving thing we can do. Tough love is still love!

As we listen for the underlying cause of a person’s poverty, we need to realize that it takes a long time to get past the layers of denial and feeling victimized that often accompany deep need. These layers have built up over time, to protect the person from pain and shame. We can avoid shaming people who come to us for help, when we recognize them as our brothers and sisters as verse 17 tells us to do!

Instead of seeing ourselves as the generous benefactor, and others as the poor recipient of our generosity, we can start seeing each person we meet as a beloved child of God, precious in God’s eyes, created in God’s likeness, just as we are. Recognizing that each person has something to offer to the community, we begin to see everyone as a contributor in some way to our common good as the body of Christ.

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Sometimes, we will fail. Sometimes we just don’t do a very good job of paying attention to the needs of others, because our own needs are so great. When we doubt our own capacity to love, and beat ourselves up for not seeing the need around us, God is gracious.

Our assurance that Christ abides in us and we in him is grounded in our obedience to his command: believe that Jesus is God’s Son, and to love each other sacrificially.

And it (may) take practice. New ways of thinking and living require lots of conscious repetition before they become habits. Laying down our lives to take up a life of love does not come naturally to us. We are self-centered human beings, after all. But John reminds us that the Holy Spirit is right there with us, to guide us toward this kind of living, this way of loving.

Jane Goodall, who has dedicated her life to studying chimpanzees, once said, “What you do makes a difference, and you have to decide what kind of difference you want to make.” Christ calls us to make a difference by being different. Loving others is not enough in itself, or everyone who showed love could claim to be a Christian. Loving others as an act of faith in Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who laid down his life for all

of us, transforms us into the people God created us to be. Laying down our lives brings us closer to the fulfilment of the Kingdom of God.

The story that Jo Anne told ends like this ...

The young woman sat next to my desk, and told me her story. She described everything that had happened in the months since I had seen her last. She knew coming to me was a long shot; that she had used up all her available options. "I know you probably can't help me with groceries, but could you at least pray for me? When you did that the last time, it really seemed to help," she said. So we prayed together for all the needs she had shared. And I broke my own rule, and wrote her out another voucher for groceries and gas. It seemed pretty small, given her circumstances, but she was grateful. I invited her to supper on Wednesday night. She hasn't shown up yet, but that isn't what matters.

What matters is that she heard someone say, "You have value. You are God's own beloved child."

Pray!