

“Love Is What We Do”
April 15, 2018
Scripture: I John 3:16-24

You may remember I mentioned a couple of weeks back that some of us during Lent spent time with a study called “Eclipsing Empire,” which is a study of Paul’s mission and letters in the matrix of the Roman Empire. One of the sessions focused entirely on urban life in the 1st century Roman world. It’s hard to really convey what life in the city was like. All we have from that era are the large, public structures that survived as ruins. They give the impression that there was tremendous wealth in the cities. But really that wealth was reserved for about 5, maybe 10% of the population. All the rest lived pretty much in poverty and their remains haven’t survived.

One thing that really struck me about that session was learning about the housing. Buildings in Roman cities couldn’t be built more than five stories high and the more expensive apartments were on the lower floors, the cheap ones were at the top. This meant the upper stories of the buildings tended to be overcrowded making them terribly top heavy. There are descriptions from that period of hearing buildings collapsing every day from the weight of those top floors. So if you lived in one of these buildings, at the top or the bottom, you were in constant danger of having the place fall in on you.

That kind of gives us an idea of the sort of environment the early Christians lived in. The Christians the writer of John’s first letter was addressing were probably urban, mostly Gentile, and mostly poor. They shared this tenuous existence where their lives were harsh because of poverty but also because of an ethos that valued strength and military victory over compassion and care for the weak.

And that might help explain why the message Christians preached was so attractive. Listen to what this writer says, “We know love by this: that he laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another.” Sacrifice is at the heart of this ethic. That’s a new concept for Gentiles in the Roman world. It arises directly from Jewish ethic but even in that context it was more abstract than it became for Christians. Christians turned to the example of Jesus’ passion as the model for the Christian life as a whole. Death wasn’t a physical expectation but a spiritual one. We die for one another through our willingness to hold each other’s needs above our own.

Sacrifice is at the heart and love is the root. Everything the Christian community does is in service to love. And for this writer love isn’t just something we feel; love is what we do. If you read this first letter of John you’ll find this concept of active love all through it. It’s here we learn that God is love. But God is revealed in Christ who died to teach us how to die for one another. Love and sacrifice are the key to the gospel, the center of the Christian life.

This can be expressed in all sorts of ways. As Henri Nouwen, the great Catholic priest and spiritual writer once said, “When the imitation of Christ does not mean to live a life like Christ, but to live your life as authentically as Christ lived his, then there are many ways and forms in which a person can be a Christian.” Here at North we choose to express this love and sacrifice through service to one another and the community around us. We teach each other; we

share gifts of music and prayer in worship; we offer compassion through tangible gestures of love like these care cases right here; we provide support and encouragement to one another. We're seeking to live authentically as followers of Jesus in a world where compassion and justice are often denied, where love and sacrifice are devalued.

So living a Christian life continues to be a challenge. We're in good company with these early Christians and we have leadership who can help us in our efforts. Those of you who are being ordained and installed this morning are called to help us love more deeply, to help us live for one another. That doesn't mean you love and sacrifice for us, but you create an environment where all of us can discover our call to live more authentically.

This writer challenges us to love not in words only but in our actions. We're called to express our love through tangible gestures that can make a difference in the world around us. Because love is what we do here. It's the most important thing we do. Through our actions of love those who despair will find hope; those who live in fear will be encouraged; and those who are broken will become whole again. So let love live in you and make God's presence known in the world.

Amen