

PASTORAL PRAYER

Gracious God, source of all love and goodness, today we reaffirm our promise to be your people. We recommit ourselves to the difficult way, the way of discipleship, the way of following Jesus as he calls. This season of Easter fills us with anticipation and hope, for newness springs among us around every turn. Most of all, it fills us with love, the love that is with us every day, the love we recognize we saw on the Cross of Jesus Christ, the love that moves us to care for our neighbors each and every day. Help us, Gracious Lord, in this difficult but rewarding path. We lift up to you all of our joys and concerns, celebrations and sorrows, desires and satisfactions, that we may grow ever closer to the image of Jesus Christ where we find completion and the direction we need all the moments of our lives.

Holy One, because you are love, we must be love also. By this fact, we know that we serve your true way. We hear the endless call to love as Christ loved, to serve as Christ served, to grow more fully and deeply into the image of the one who perfectly lived and loved so that all may live fully. We come to be the flock of the faithful shepherd, and we come to do as he commands, for his commands are not burdensome but joyful. Help us, God, to live joyfully into this command to love others as you have loved us, this awesome calling that fills all with goodness and life. Lead us to the loving image of Jesus Christ, who loves us dearly, and to love in response of his way. We pray all these things in the name of the one who gave all in love for us, Jesus the Christ, who taught us to pray as one...

SERMON

God is Good! (All the time!) All the time! (God is Good!) The Lord be with you. (And also with you.) Lift up your hearts. (We lift them up to the Lord.) He is risen! (He is risen indeed!) These are common calls and responses. We know the right responses when

a familiar call rings out because we, over time and with work, learn how they work. When I start saying that we “pray the prayer Christ taught us, saying...” you know the next words are...“Our Father...” It happens in church; it happens in life. If you were a fan of Ohio State, I would yell out, “O-H!” and you would yell back...anyone know? “I-O!” We just internally know when there is a call expecting us to respond, and we do it. When you are in Nebraska, and you hear the fight song “Hail Varsity,” you know when you are supposed to yell out the refrain, “Go Huskers!” and when you hear John Phillip Sousa’s “March of the Cornhuskers,” when to spell out the name “Nebraska.” When there’s a call, you become accustomed to how and when to respond because it is just natural and appropriate for the setting, and it brings us together. A call and response, though, is not always in what we say; it can easily be what we do. In the same way, our scriptures today are a call, a call that is more than words but that goes to the meaning of life itself, and we must, in turn, respond with more than words; we must respond in action and in truth in the way of Jesus Christ.

Last week, we heard a sermon from Joan Allen reaffirming an important truth: God is the source of unconditional love. God IS unconditional love. God loves us when we are at our lowest; God loves us when we are at our best. God loves us no matter what. Because God does it, we are called to do the same. The Greatest and Second Commandment are clear: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself.” Today, we put the same message in a different way. This scripture confirms the two greatest commandments while adding a twist. The life of Christ is our example and the call that deserves a response on our part. “We know love by this,” says the scripture in 1 John, “that he laid down his life for us – and we ought to lay down our lives

for one another.” Like the call to worship or any other call, this is the call, and we must give the response. We know how to respond through the scriptures from John and 1 John.

Today, we return to the letter, the Epistle of 1 John and its messages for a faithful life. Last time, we spoke about how we should not treat others, how we often fall into pesky sins that pull us away from ourselves, others, and God. Today, we hear another side: how we truly connect with ourselves, others, and God. It is how we love one another, loving in truth and action. It is our response to the love of God as we see in Jesus Christ. Let’s look at scripture again from 1 John and John, look at love a little more deeply on the everyday level and the level we are called, and see how this amazing command is more than a command; it’s a response, a joyful response, a joyful response that changes us at our very core and the people around us.

Let’s review some of the fundamentals of this important letter before we start. 1 John was written to a church in crisis, reminding the congregation what this Christian life looks like in the midst of so many struggles. It is a reminder to get back to the basics, because from the basics is where we can grow into maturity and fullness. This passage has one basic focus: love. The author points back to the source of it all, Jesus Christ, to make the point. The life of Jesus, the sacrifice of Jesus, everything about Jesus shows us how the grand scope of love works. Jesus loved not for his own fulfillment but for the fulfillment of the other person. This is the call; the sacrifice of Jesus Christ is the heart of it all. It is the sacrifice that draws us nearer to the Creator and the resurrection that gives us new life. Christ laid down his life for our betterment. That is the call, and we are commanded to do the same. Scripture says, “And this is the commandment, that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us.” This is

like gravity: it's more than a great idea; it's the law. It's non-optional; it's not something to take or leave. It's a commandment. Sounds serious. On the other hand, it's wrong to think it is something we just have to do. There's so much more than obligation.

According to the podcast Sermon Brainwave, there is a lot to understand about this simple commandment. Basically, this is a command, not optional, but a command. Does it make a lot of sense for us to be commanded to love one another? Think of all the things you are commanded to do. Clean up your room or your office. Take out the trash. Mop the floors. Cook dinner. Sound fun, right? These don't actually inspire a lot of commitment when we are told what to do. We don't want to be commanded to do something when we can be kindly asked. For example, Joan, you will be the lay reader next week and for the next five weeks following. We don't want to do that. Let's look at it differently. It's more than a commandment; it's the calling to be changed into the image of Christ. After all, love has a way of changing us to the very deepest part of ourselves. When you love, it has a way of making all that inside anger to that person melt away over time. I mean, it's the story of the Grinch himself. Once he saw the love of the Who people, his heart grew many times larger. The Grinch is a great example because he loved because he saw love. In our case, this is the calling to be changed IN RESPONSE to the love and action that we already have realized from God and the effects in our lives. God is the one who moved first; God is the one who loved us first, and the love of God is greater than we can understand. We believe that within our hearts. That's only the first step on a much greater journey. The point is where we go from there, and that is living a life of love with those in this building and outside of it.

Through Jesus' example, we translate the ideas into our own lives and understanding, but it must be tangible. The author says that love is shown in caring for those who struggle in just having the basics of life, for love is shown not in word but in deed. Scripture says "let us love, not in word or speech but in truth and action." This is the sign of true love, for it is how we come to know and live out God's path. But let's be clear: it's not a call to sacrifice our lives but devoting our lives to the principles that Christ laid out for us to live. God's love is so great, and it leads us to love others and ourselves fully in response. Christ sacrificed himself that we would learn from that example and sacrifice ourselves for others. It is our call for a response, because while it is a once-and-for-all action, it is a call that leads us to respond in love as this Epistle so eloquently puts it.

So we are called to love and to love devotionally as a response to Christ's love. Sounds good, but we have to continually ask what love means to us and how we live into it. The greatest question will always be, what does love look like? What does love look like to you? We all seek to receive love and give love differently, depending on our own personalities. Lately, I've been doing a lot of work with the *Five Love Languages* by Gary Chapman. It is typically a resource for couples, but this resource is not only about romance. True love is more than just romance; it also provides us a lot of insight with how we can love one another the way that Christ taught. How do you best show love for someone who just needs the gift of someone caring for them? How do we best show love for a grandchild or a child or a best friend? We each have our different needs. When you are asked what love looks like, I imagine everyone in this congregation will give a different answer. Think about how you would answer that question. My wife finds love at its best when I am working with her and enjoying with her things that she is passionate about, like cooking or

her favorite TV shows. I, on the other hand, see how others love me in giving and receiving gifts, because I see them as tangible signs of inward thought and caring. They aren't necessarily romantic, but these signs show us that we are loved. No matter who you are, it really depends on our own personal preferences. Some see a sign of love as wanting to spend quality time with each other. Some see love as giving and receiving gifts. Some see love as receiving compliments and uplifting affirmations about what one does well or how one is working hard at something. Sometimes a simple pat on the back can mean the world and we don't even realize it. We must seek to love one another well in the ways that they need it because we need to be loved in our own unique ways too. It is a faithful response to the love we have received. There are many ways to love one another, but it has to work together. We also have to work at it in its tangible forms because we are shown by what we do. We have to reach that peak that 1 John lifts: "We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us - and we ought to lay down our lives for one another." As the Gospel of John puts it in the words of Jesus: "I came that they may have life and have it abundantly." But Christ offers it to us to take or leave. After all, as we said Easter and afterward, abundant life is a choice. New life is a choice. Loving our neighbors is a choice.

It's up to us to make good choices every day, and that requires that we work with people, not for people. Do we want to be loved as one person defines what love looks like or how we define it? Of course, we want to be loved as is most meaningful for us. And when we do, scripture holds great promise. "And by this we will know that we are from the truth and will reassure our hearts before him whenever our hearts condemn us; for God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything." Love is the key, for it is the connection to the one who loves, the one who keeps no account of sins forgiven. It is often difficult

because we want to hold on to guilt for our wrongdoings, but when we live this life of love, the life of faithful response to the one who calls, our hearts are right before the Creator.

God is Good! (All the time!) All the time! (God is Good!) Call and response. We know when we hear a call that leads us to respond in the same manner. The Christian life can be boiled down to that simple fact: we live, we are the response to the work and the calling of God in Jesus Christ. The life of Christ was the call that responded with the church. But the church is an ongoing response that calls for the devotion of all our lives. The basis of that is a life of love. We love because God first loved us, and we love others in response to that, whether deserving or not. This is the heart of our calling, the calling that Jesus came to send in word, action, and truth. Thanks be to God! Amen and amen.