

St. Paul's Congregational Church  
April 22, 2018, 1 John 3:16-24  
Abide in Me  
The Rev. Cynthia F. Reynolds

Let us pray: may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Sometimes there's a scripture passage that really touches us – and I'm thinking that's what scripture is supposed to do – get inside of us and clarify what we believe and make a difference in how we live out what it is we do believe. This is one of those passages for me. The topic of love is widespread everywhere in the Bible for sure. We know the great commandment: love God, love neighbor as yourself. But the very word “love” gets tangled up in all kinds of thoughts, doesn't it – how do we define, describe love and how do we know what it is, how do we live it out?

I think it's the question the writer of this passage asks that has stayed with me so powerfully: how does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother in sister in need and yet refuses help? And then there's an almost plaintive statement – little children, let us love, not in word or speech but in truth and action.

This is a down to earth question, a down to earth plea. When we find Jesus giving ethical instruction in the gospels, he's often talking about the church. But here, he's talking to people – people like you and me. Individuals called to share – to lay down one's life for another person – this can mean lots of things, but here it demands no less than this: to promise, as long as you are able, never to let a brother or sister go hungry. And I believe this goes far beyond just physical hunger though it's certainly a reason for our concentration on donations for the Food Bank and our involvement with the Food Pantry here. We're all hungry aren't we – hungry for something - and in this passage we're being called to feed each other.

So in my reflection and reading this week, I came across some stories I'd like to share with you:

The first is about a church that has an unwritten rule: we will never ignore a member's basic need. Whenever the members of the church know of a need, they call the pastor: “Is there any money in the benevolence fund? You know Mr. Smith got cut back on his hours, and his kids need help with school supplies.” The pastor reports that the answer is always yes – he says we've yet to encounter a need we couldn't fill.

At his Bible study, he asked the members why they have never made explicit what they all know to be true – why not say it out loud? We need this great news in an anxious age – why not state aloud that no matter how bad it gets, we will be there for each other? He says, I didn't get an answer at the Bible study – in fact, the very mention of the subject seemed embarrassing. I suspect, he says, that not only do we fear the future, we also fear each other. We are afraid that somebody will try to take advantage of us, afraid that we will have to expose ourselves at our most intimate, private level: our bank account.

What do you think of that? I suppose it could be true for some. But as I thought about this reason for the fear, and I agree it is a sense of fear – I wondered if it wasn't about something deeper than that.

I remembered a man once in my former church who spoke out loudly and forcefully in a church meeting against increasing our mission giving – in terms of time, talent, and treasure. He said that we all work hard for what we get – that it's ours – those people who are poor and needy are getting what they deserve – if they really wanted to and really worked hard, they could have it all too. I was stunned by this statement – how does it stand next to the question we heard this morning: 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 help? Maybe it's fear.

John tells us, put your money where your mouth is. If you love one another, you extend help when someone is in need.

But this isn't just about money - I think we all realize that.

Here's another story: of an Easter people on a Sunday morning, welcoming a visitor who steps in off the street.

"Hi, my name is Joe" his name tag reads as he stands in the parish hall at coffee hour. He looks a little uncomfortable, standing by the coffee table, a sugar donut snowing on his shirt.

An aside here – a first time visitor goes to coffee hour – that's an extraordinary risk for some folks to take – I can tell you experiences I've had visiting a church and going to coffee hour when nobody talked to me....maybe you've experienced that too. Did you ever go back to that church? Especially a small church like ours where visitors really stand out?

Back to Joe's story – he's just moved to the area, starting a new life in a new town, and he's trying out a new idea. Maybe there will be a home for him here, in this church, among these people, who all seem already to know each others' names. Joe hasn't been inside a church in years. He remembers vaguely a place with high ceilings. He remembers wondering as

a boy if the high ceilings were meant to hold God in up under the rafters. Where else would God be?

A man comes up to greet Joe and says, “Hi, my name is William but everybody calls me Sparky.” It is obvious by his nickname that Sparky has a history here. Sparky has a story and a place in the bigger story here at this church. And here he is welcoming Joe into the story.

Joe returns the following Sunday and the one after that. Soon after that he notices that the pulpit hangings are a different color. A few of the hymns become familiar to him. The little girl who sits with her parents in the pew behind him finally smiles at him when he turns around to pass the peace.

After several months, he misses a few Sundays because of a surgical procedure that keeps him home in bed recuperating. He is surprised when a parishioner calls to ask about him. Joe has never been missed before.

He is equally touched when he finds that his name has been added to the prayer list. Something like that has never happened to him before either. Then he signs up to help cook at the annual parish pancake supper. Joe discovers he has a knack for flipping pancakes and is affectionately given the name, “Flip” by the other members of the cooking crew. The name sticks and that’s what everyone calls him now.

Someone overhears Flip talk about how much he enjoyed skiing in college. His name comes up when the youth group asks for another driver and chaperone for their winter ski trip. He agrees to go, and though he is not a particularly outgoing guy, the kids appreciate his low-key way of making sure no one is left out, and everyone has a good time. They ask him if he would teach their Sunday School class next year. What an honor that is!

That class, with Flip’s leadership, decides to raise money to buy children’s books for an after school tutoring program the church has taken on as a community outreach project. So they decide to serve a pancake breakfast one Sunday after worship. The donations they receive generously support their book buying project. Flip encourages some of the youth to volunteer as tutors as well. Friendships develop, and the children are sent home with presents at Christmastime, every gift chosen with a particular child in mind, his name printed in big letters on the tag.

I couldn’t help but think of what Sparky started when he greeted Joe at that first coffee hour. Imagine.

There’s so much here, isn’t there – people paid attention, got to know him, listened to what interested him, invited him in to participate, created a feeling of openness to encourage him to share his gifts and talents. There’s a

challenge, an opportunity for us as church, isn't it. We can always do more – what are we afraid of?

This church illustrates the story of an Easter people, each called by name by Jesus, often quietly, without a lot of fuss, into his abiding love, and sharing that love.

So many in the world are listening for, are yearning for that voice. A tremendous need we all have is to be noticed, to be needed, to have someone know our name, to know that we matter! How are we doing here?

Judy Fletcher is a member of the Alban Institute Board of Directors and a Presbyterian minister. She writes, “From the beginning of my life, my home congregation loved me into the faith. As a preschooler in the nursery, I felt so very safe. A few years later, in the primary department, I remember standing at the sand table, charting the journeys of Paul or the journey of the Exodus. Little did I know then that such teaching would form the beginning of my knowledge of the Bible and its stories, or that when we were invited to discuss and respond to these stories that it was the beginning of my training to be a leader of the church.

She continues, this church of 250 members in Texarkana, Texas, was where, even as a small child, people knew my name. These people knew all the children of the church. They helped raise us and teach us and called our behavior into question when necessary. They made us feel important. Even now, I linger on those words, “they knew my name.”

What implications do these two stories have for our life together? What sounds familiar? We get hints of this story when young people brought up in this church come back, come home, when they want their children baptized. We get hints of this story when we go up to the 3<sup>rd</sup> floor and see names of then children, now young adults, painted on the walls. This congregation has nurtured so many children over the years, hasn't it.

But the times, the world, have changed – and change creates fear, change creates a sense of loss, change can paralyze us. What in this story sounds different from what we know?

All of us, all of us, are hungry to be valued, to matter, and one of the ways we do that is to call each other by name. Everyone matters. When one is absent, the whole suffers. How are we living that out?

So, the haunting question surfaces again: how can God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help? Let us love, not just in word or speech, but in truth and action.

Another story closer to home for us: some years ago an episode of the TV show, “Makeover -Extreme Edition” was filmed in Irvington – it was a

show that would totally renovate a house for people in need with the assistance of a talented TV crew.

A colleague heard about this project and drove to Irvington to check it out. She didn't know the city and she circled around before she got close to the set – she saw block after block of burned out, boarded up houses and other houses in need of serious repair. But then she caught a glimpse of the barricades and portable fences and knew that she had arrived.

She managed to get close and found herself in the hive of activity. She talked to many folks – one a young man from Florida who was with the show. He told her that most times there are tons of spectators watching but because of the nature of this site, no one was really allowed into the actual street area during the building. She stood watching for a while – reflecting that she was seeing the best in humanity that almost always comes out during efforts like this.

As she was leaving, she met someone from Irvington who spoke of how this event is a symbol of hope to the town and a sign that someone cares. As she got closer to her car she saw 4 young men in dreadlocks and tee shirts, sitting on the wall in front of a house one block over from the site. She asked, “How do you feel about what is going on over there?”

One said, “Nice someone is doing something for someone in the neighborhood.” Another spoke up and said, “But we all need something.” My friend said, “They looked at all the other houses around us quietly for a second – finally the young man closest to me said, without bitterness, just resignation, “Don't nobody care about this neighborhood?”

Again I wonder and am challenged: 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 help? Little children, let us love, not in word or speech but in truth and action.

We all have a lot on our plates. We all have fears and worries and concerns on our minds. Our natural instinct is to protect ourselves from being bombarded with more to do, more pain, more fear – and that can lead us to get stuck in survival mode instead of opening ourselves to new things. We all know somehow that being part of God's community, this church, helps us get through the days and long nights of our souls. Don't we want to share that? Don't we want others to experience that comfort, that strength, that love?

What if, just what if, a congregation breaks the rules of the culture – a culture that thrives on fear, on hunger. What if this congregation breaks those rules and removes the fear and the hunger by promising to care for one another, not in word but in deeds, in a spirit of acceptance and openness?

We just might reveal the risen Son of God, the one who lays down his life for his sheep. With a living God loose in the world, we can begin to live without fear. We can begin to live in a new freedom, knowing we can count on each other. And that freedom is contagious to those who join us here in this community. How wonderful that would be!

Those haunting, nagging thoughts I've had all week have made a difference in the way I've spent my time. As unsettling as they have been at times, they've also been a blessing.

Can each of us ask the same question that John asks? How indeed does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help? Little children, let us love, not in word or speech but in truth and action. And let us remember the great commandment and let it work in and on and through us every minute of the day: that we should believe in the name of Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us. All who obey his commandments abide in him, and he abides in them. And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit that he has given us.

Let's celebrate that – let's nurture each other – let's nurture our community, our neighbors; let's abide in God's love and then let's love each other into the faith. Amen.