

Building A Church—Part 2 “The Ethic of Love”

This week, we our exploration of how the church got going... How 12 rather bumbling disciples and a group of women grew from a few dozen to a few hundred to a few thousand to... well... the church the world over.

Last week, we explored how this movement first took shape. We explored how, after Jesus was raised from the dead and ascended to heaven, those first followers went out and simply started telling others what they'd seen and heard and experienced Jesus do and teach. They just shared their stories... and treated others as you do amid God's kingdom. And the book of Acts says an amazing thing happened—more and more people began uncovering for themselves the love and the grace and the embrace of God's beautifully inclusive kingdom. The kingdom of God spread and grew.

Fast forward about one century from that point, and the Christian movement had spread far beyond the bounds of Jerusalem as various faith communities, or the earliest forms of the Church were being created. This morning, we read a letter written to one of those early faith communities in our first lesson. It's a letter known as 1 John, named as such because this community held a special kinship to the Gospel of John.

We actually know very little about them. But one thing the letter does reveal is that, people being people, there was some kind of rift going on in this church. It had evidently gotten so bad that some folks had started to leave. So an “elder” in the faith who was familiar with this community wrote them this letter, essentially asking them to stay true to the gospel of Christ and start putting *first things first*.

But what is, exactly, this first thing?

Just what is the most essential element of the church?

The one thing that must be present for there to be any real faith community at all?

Well, according to 1 John, it's not the things churches tend to argue about.

The first thing is not our belief system, or our orthodoxy.

Nor is the first thing our organization, or the church's structure. In fact, we Presbyterians should note that nowhere in Scripture is there a command that faith communities must do all things decently and in order.

Rather, the foundation of the faith community's relationship with God and each other, according to 1 John, is that four letter word we talk about so much, even if we struggle to live out. You know it. Starts with L and ends with “ove.”

Love is what matters, 1 John says. Love. But not love in the sense of some sentimental emotion or romantic attraction. Rather, the love 1 John talks about is a very specific kind of love.

He writes, “We know love by this, that Jesus laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. 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? So then, let us love, not in word of speech, but in truth or action.”

So take your sentimentality and throw it out the window. And while you’re at it, take those notions of romance and toss them out, too. Because the love God calls us to share has nothing to do with feelings or emotions, and everything to do with action and behaviors.

I’ve always been fond of the way the great Presbyterian pastor Frederick Buechner explained it when he said:

*In the Christian sense, love is... an act of the will. (So) when Jesus tells us to love our neighbors, he’s not telling us to love them in the sense of responding to them with a cozy emotional feeling... He’s telling us to love our neighbors in the sense of being willing to work for their well-being even if it means sacrificing our own well-being to that end.*¹

That’s actually a pretty radical statement to make to a faith community in conflict. A faith community bickering with each other so badly that many were beginning to leave.

1 John reminds them, “You were founded on the ethic of love. You were born in the love God has shown you in Jesus Christ. So if you love God... if you truly love God the way you say you do, then you will love the things God loves... and you will love them the way God loves them.

Well... 1 John doesn’t say it exactly like that. The letter says when we love as God commands to love, then “God abides us in, and we abide in God.”

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It’s a beautiful statement, don’t you think? The Church has been founded on the ethic of love. Love not in the sense of what we feel, but love in the sense of what we do... how we work for the well-being of the other.

But the ideal 1 John lays out also seems awfully high, does it not? To love like Jesus loves? To imitate the “Good Shepherd,” as Jesus called himself in our Gospel lesson this morning? To love like the one who gave every ounce of himself for his sheep?

To love... quite frankly... with *sacrifice*?

Truth be told, not many of us are ready and willing to just up and sacrifice something of ourselves for someone we’re not intimately close to. I mean, amid that whole shepherd motif, Jesus says he lays down his life for his sheep... but how many of us are willing to risk our own well-being for the needs of those around us—the poor, the marginalized, the sick, the broken? This is the kind of love Jesus speaks of.

But there’s also a lesson for us in this shepherding motif when we look close enough. For in calling himself the Good Shepherd, Jesus contrasts himself with the hired hand. A mercenary. Someone who just shows up one day to make a buck by tending to sheep, but who also isn’t really invested in the sheep. That’s why, at the first sign of danger, the hired hand runs

¹ Frederick Buechner *Beyond Words* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, Inc.) 2004, 231-232.

away. It's why the hired hand isn't willing to risk or sacrifice anything of himself on behalf of the sheep. After all, the hired hand doesn't know them.

Not so for the shepherd. Not so for the one who's spend every day with his sheep. Who's slept in the fields with the sheep. Who's walked the sheep day in and out to fresh, green pastures. Who's led them around and through storms. Who's delivered their young. Who's chased down the wandering and taken care of the hurting.

Sacrifice isn't a problem for the shepherd who *knows* his sheep. While they all look like one big mess of wool to the hired hand, the shepherd can tell them all apart from 50 yards away. He knows their names, their voices, their peccadillos and idiosyncrasies, because he's spent so much time with them throughout their lives.

You see... the shepherd loves his sheep because he knows them.

It's why it's so much easier to care for those you know. It's why the dividing walls we allow to exist in our world are so unhealthy for all of us—those on both sides. We need to know the ones we're called to love. We need to know their names, their faces, their stories. We need to know their joys and concerns and their fears. For in getting to know them, we come closer to truly loving them.

It's why it's not the least bit a chore to prepare a meal for Sunday community lunch when we know those we get to serve.

It's why race relations, immigration issues, and gun violence suddenly move from being peripheral issues to deeply personal and immediate issues... when we know those who are being affected by them.

And it's why the Church must continue striving to be truly and deeply communal—relational—invested not just in our own formation but in the building of relationships with each other and the lives all around us.

In getting to know others, we come closer to loving them.

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Now, I could go on for another 10 minutes about how important this is for the missional identity of the church. And, frankly, I suspect I will in a sermon yet to be written.

But today, I want to make a vitally important connection that I personally never saw until it was pointed out to me about 15 years ago. And that's this.

As Christians, it's rather irrefutable that we're called to care for God's creation, right? It's humanity's very first covenant with our Creator. That God blesses us with creation, and calls us to care for it.

But to care for Creation as we are called... to reach the point that we hold Creation's needs equal to and one with our own, even sacrificing things of ourselves—our comfort, our convenience, our money—to better care for Creation... we need to love it.

And to love it, friends... we simply need to know it better. We simply need to spend time with it. To play in it. To gaze at it. To stop looking through it and start paying attention to it.

We might learn to identify the trees around us.

Take note of the colors emerging in the landscapes this spring.
 We might learn the songs and colors of the birds who fill our sky,
 or the names of stars and constellations that fill the night.
 We need to get our feet wet again in the Roland Run stream...
 Take some hikes around the Loch Raven Reservoir...
 Worship and play and camp up at BeeTree.
 And so much more.
 We need to get to know God's creation better, and help our children get to know it
 better... if we're to love it as we're called.

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Personally... my love of creation didn't really begin to grow until I owned my first home. My family was never really into camping when I was growing up. We went a handful of times, but mostly with church groups that were always doing things I wasn't interested in. My grandfather took me fishing and horseback riding a few times, and I enjoyed it... but those hobbies didn't stick. So I never really thought of myself as an outdoorsman. And frankly, never appreciated the grandeur within Creation as I could have.

But when Melissa and I purchased our first home... suddenly, its bleak and barren yard became my own. And I began taking a vested interest. So I learned about things like soil health and PH balances, and the importance of organic materials, and planting native plants.

It took a lot of work to turn that yard around... but as I was investing myself in it, it suddenly donned on me like a two-by-four to the head... I actually enjoyed getting my hands dirty and planting the seeds and watering the shrubs and, don't tell my folks' this... but even mowing the lawn. I enjoyed getting to know the names of the flowers and their seasons of bloom and where they liked to be planted.

And then... then for the first time in my life—I kid you not—I began noticing other people's yards... and the shrubs and flowers gardens they'd chosen to care for. And then... when a tree in my back yard began to die a year later... I was surprised to feel this odd sense of grief that I'd just taken that tree for granted... and now it had to come down. And the robin's nest that sat within it would no longer house the mother and her young.

And amid it all, Creation became more alive to me than it ever had before. The beauty and grandeur within just that tiny place and time in my yard began to open my eyes to things I'd just taken for granted my whole life long... but now was able to appreciate and even... yes... grow to love in appreciation for what God has made and asked me to care for.

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You see, I'm still not really into camping. And while I love being outside, I'm still not an outdoorsman in the sense of fishing or hunting. But I continue to be fascinated by the creation that surrounds me. And I want to know it better. To appreciate it more fully so I might care for it more intentionally as I hold creation's well-being equal to and one with my own.

So as we continue to live into our covenant, Towson Presbyterian Church, to be an Earth Care Congregation—an achievement we celebrate very gratefully this day—may we continue investing ourselves in getting to know the grandeur God has placed all around us in this time and this place... that we might enjoy it, appreciate it, and love it, not in word and speech, but in truth and action. Amen.