

PRACTICE LOVE ABOVE ALL**1 JOHN 3:11-24**

What's a myth? Sometimes a myth is just an old, much loved story usually featuring supernatural beings or events. Myths are shared and enjoyed by a specific group of people. Think of the Greeks and their stories about Zeus or Apollo. Or for Americans, think of Paul Bunyan or Bigfoot. Hopefully, Bigfoot is a myth! But a myth can also be something else. A myth can also be a widely held but false belief or idea. In other words, a myth can be a clever lie believed by a whole lot of people to be true.

Now, I would venture to guess there are more myths attached to the word "love" than just about any other word, idea, or concept. For example, the late Scott Peck, a psychiatrist, lamented what he called "the myth of romantic love" which has been dominant in Western culture for centuries now. What's that? The myth of romantic love tells us that for every young man in the world there is one and only one young woman meant just for him and vice versa. When we meet this person, we hopelessly fall in love with him or her. Because this match is both perfect and pre-determined by fate, we will then be able to satisfy all of each other needs forever and ever. Therefore, we will live happily forever after in perfect union and harmony.

Should it come to pass, however, that a painful level of friction develops between us, then obviously a dreadful mistake was made. People meant to stay together should never have to work hard at loving each other. No, we misread the stars. We didn't in fact find our "soul mate." What we thought was love was not true love, because real love is supposed to be easy and effortless. Therefore, only one of two outcomes is now possible. Either we live unhappily ever after or we get divorced. Peck argued that the myth of romantic love fueled a whole lot of needless suffering among married couples he counselled and treated over the years. It was more dangerous than helpful.

This Sunday and next, we're going to reflect on love because that's what John wrote about in 1 John – this five chapter letter, sermon, or essay in the New Testament we've been considering this fall season. "Keep It Simple, Saint" is the message series title. Following Jesus need not be confusing or complicated. In fact, John said there are just three tests or marks of spiritual authenticity. One: doctrinal accuracy. Get Jesus right – who He is and what He did. Two: growth in a godly lifestyle. Our everyday life – attitudes and actions – should increasingly reflect Jesus. Three: love God's people. The passage we consider today and also next week are all about that third test or mark. Let's read our text for today. as there might be a specific myth attached to romantic love, there are other myths attached to love in general. Like what? Like love is a feeling. Nope, that's a myth. Like love is easy and effortless. Nope, that's a myth, too. Like God expects us to love everyone. Believe it or not, that's a myth as well. John's words here reveal some interesting assumptions. First of all...

REAL LOVE ISN'T NATURAL OR AUTOMATIC.

John started out by saying, "This is the message you have heard from the beginning: We should love one another." (1 Jo. 3:11 NLT) The beginning of what? When John

was part of the original twelve disciples, Jesus had said, “So now I am giving you a new commandment: Love each other. Just as I have loved you, you should love each other. Your love for one another will prove to the world that you are my disciples.” (Jo. 13:34-35 NLT) I don’t have to convince anyone here today that Christians ought to love each other. It’s just a no-brainer, right? But, it wasn’t so obvious to the very first Christians. They had to be taught and encouraged to love each other. When I was speaking on the book of James earlier this year, one of the commentators observed that when James told his audience – also among the first people to believe in Jesus - that it wasn’t a good idea to physically attack, publicly slander, or even kill each other, he was probably being quite literal. And here John had to encourage these believers not to be like Cain. He was the son of Adam and Eve who committed the first murder by killing his brother, Abel. John had to remind them that treating other human beings hatefully is a manifestation of sin still dominating our lives. Our sin severely damaged our ability to love others. That’s why real love is neither natural nor automatic for any of us.

John appears to make another assumption here. Before we can love those who aren’t in God’s family, we need to learn how to love those who are in God’s family. Most Bible scholars think John was writing to several churches in and around the city of Ephesus in what is now the country of Turkey. Apparently, there were some very real interpersonal, relational problems going on in those churches. Otherwise, why hammer away at this specific issue in this letter to them? We don’t know what those problems were in those churches, but John had to appeal to them very strongly here to love each other.

So, John had to be explicit about what seems obvious to us. We take 2,000 years of Christian teaching and conditioning for granted. Be that as it may, the fact is we still struggle with loving other followers of Jesus as we should, too. In South Africa, with its awful legacy of apartheid, the society is still quite segregated between black and white. So are the churches. In other African nations, the divisions aren’t racial but tribal. Believers from one people group don’t trust believers from another people group. Over in India, Christians continue to struggle with the caste system as upper caste believers don’t always want to associate with lower caste believers. In Latin America there’s tension between the Pentecostal church and other Christian movements. And here in the US, we can have knockdown, drag out fights over worship styles, ministry strategies, and just about everything else possible! The fact is whether it’s the first century or the twenty-first century, real love isn’t natural or automatic.

That’s why John made it clear when Christians truly love each other, it’s proof positive God is present among us. There’s no other explanation! “If we love our brothers and sisters who are believers, it proves that we have passed from death to life.” (1 Jo. 3:14 NLT) You’re probably aware there’s a growing number of people in American culture who call themselves followers of Jesus who have no interest whatsoever in becoming a part of any local congregation. Barna Research Group estimated their number to be about 20 million people. 20 million “Christians” with no use for any church! Their attitude is “Jesus, yes; the church, no.” They see the local church as being irrelevant to their lives, or hypocritical, or not reflecting their viewpoints on social issues. Well, boys

and girls, welcome to humanity! Real love can't avoid relationships with real people – even flawed, irritating, and annoying people. It's impossible to love people with whom you have no relationship, no sense of community, and no doing of life together.

Furthermore, real love can't tolerate substitutes for substance. As much as I appreciate what technology has added to our lives, it should never replace actual relationships. You might know we've added live streaming of our service on Sundays. I'm all for it, because we know it's now become the primary way younger people check out a new church before actually visiting it. Well and good. I also know it's been an effective way for our own people to connect with us when they're on vacation, out of town, ill, or just unable to get out. Great! But if live streaming becomes a substitute for developing authentic relationships with God's people, that's not good. You can get great Bible teaching on podcasts, TV and radio, whatever. You can be blessed singing along to great praise music on You Tube. But here's what you can't get: real love.

Is KRBC a loving church? We're a diverse community of people - ethnically, culturally, socio-economically, and generationally - yet we appreciate those differences and enjoy one another. I've been told our people are friendly. Newcomers say they feel welcomed. There's a lot of caring expressed through our ministries. You're very responsive and generous when we have people in great need. So, yes, I think we could safely describe KRBC as a loving congregation. But how deep is that love? Could it get deeper? Are we satisfied with whatever levels of intimacy, caring, and prayer we experience together? Are we able to have hard conversations with each other? Do we love each other only when it's convenient? Do we truly make sacrifices for one another? Is our kind of love in this place, the kind of love the world would stand up and take note of? John isn't talking about warm hugs, polite smiles, or friendly handshakes. He's writing about a love that's distinctive - different from any other love anywhere else in the world. Let's remember that real love doesn't show up naturally or automatically. It's something we keep asking God to produce in us, through us, and – sometimes - even despite us. I see another strong assumption in John's words here.

REAL LOVE IS MODELED BY JESUS.

The dominant theme of most popular music is love. You'd think our culture would have figured out what real, true love looks like by now, because we sure have a whole lot of songs about it! There's a pop song from 1984 that got to #1 in both the U.S. and Britain. According to Billboard magazine, it's one of the top classic rock songs of all time. The title of it is "I Wanna Know What Love Is" by a band called Foreigner. You might remember the chorus: "I wanna know what love is / I want you to show me / I want to feel what love is / I know you can show me." Now that part is true enough. People do want to know what love is. What exactly is love? Real love? True love?

John said it all goes back to Jesus. "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." (1 Jo. 3:16 NLT) In my study on this passage, I found a simple, straightforward definition of

real love that I liked a lot. Remember, we're all about trying to keep it simple, saint! Here's the first part: Love is giving of myself. According to John, love isn't something you feel or something you say. That's one of those myths. Love is something you do. It's an action. Jesus "gave up His life for us." Have you ever noticed how often Scripture links the cross with love? "For this is how God loved the world: He gave his one and only Son..." (Jo. 3:16 NLT) "But God showed his great love for us by sending Christ to die for us while we were still sinners." (Rom. 5:8 NLT) "This is real love—not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as a sacrifice to take away our sins." (1 John 4:10 NLT) If love is fundamentally something you do, the fundamental thing you do is to give - and give not just anything, but something personal and precious, something of yourself. God gave His Son. Jesus gave His life.

Be it your spouse, another family member, someone here at church, a neighbor, a fellow worker, or a homeless person standing on the corner of Karl and 161- real love always means some kind of extension of myself in some way, shape or form to someone else. It may involve warm and positive feelings, but it doesn't rise to the level of love until it's something you do – something you act upon. Love isn't a feeling, it's an act. It's a giving away of something of yourself. "Dear children, let's not merely say that we love each other; let us show the truth by our actions." (1 Jo. 3:18 NLT)

Here's a second part to our definition of real love. Love is giving of myself for the good of others. Love isn't just giving yourself indiscriminately just to prove a point or do something admirable. No, real love is giving of yourself for the good of others. It must meet a real need or serve a worthwhile purpose in the other person's life. Jesus didn't die on the cross just to prove how sacrificial, or noble, or heroic He was. He gave up his life for us to pay for our sins so we could be forgiven and begin to have a relationship with His Father. Suppose I was sitting on the end of a pier enjoying a gorgeous summer day when a stranger came along, jumped into the water, shouted out to me "I'm dying to prove my love for you," and then promptly drowned. Would that make any sense? I might need love, but this odd act by some stranger had no rational relationship to my needs. It didn't prove his love for me in any meaningful way. But suppose I'd fallen off the pier into the water and I couldn't swim. Then this complete stranger came along just at that very moment, saw my distress, jumped into the water, and managed to save me from drowning even though in the process he drowned himself. Then I'd say, "Now, that's amazing. That's real love."

That's what God has done for each of us through Jesus. God didn't send his Son just to get our attention or impress us. Rather, God sent his Son to rescue us, to save us, to deliver us, and to bring us out of death and into life. Again, be it your spouse, another family member, someone here at church, a neighbor, a fellow worker, or a homeless person you meet along the way – real love also means the giving of myself for another person's good. It's meeting a real and legitimate need in another person's life. It's not about showing others how compassionate you are; it's not about doing something just because you find it to be rewarding; it's about helping where help is sorely needed.

Loving is giving of myself for the good of others. That's a pretty good definition of real love, but Jesus' love had an even greater dimension to it. So here's the third part to our definition. Love is giving of myself for the good of others, even toward those who dislike me. The remarkable thing about God's love is that He extends it to people who aren't even interested in it. He gives it away to people who want nothing to do with Him, or Jesus, or the Christian faith at all. Every human being starts out life having turned his or her back on God. We've chosen to do our own thing and live life our own way. We didn't go looking for God. God came looking for us in the person of His Son, Jesus. And long before we understood His love, responded to it, or received it, He laid down His life for us, and He did that while being fully aware of how we've rejected Him.

That third part to our definition is essential for it to be Christian love, real love, or true love. The point is we don't get to choose who we love. We're not called to love only those who like us or who agree with us or who ask for our love. We're called to love those who are different from us, who disagree with us, and even those who may be actively against us. A pastor named Vaughn Roberts put it this way: "When you love people who are like you, that's ordinary. When you love people who are unlike you, that's extraordinary. When you love people who dislike you, that's revolutionary." That's the kind of love John is calling us to - the kind of love the world is waiting to see. Here's a third and final assumption I hear in John's words.

REAL LOVE IS RECOGNIZABLE.

Real love is pretty simple, saint. You know it when you see it. John assumed real love is down to earth and practical. He provided this example, "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? Dear children, let's not merely say that we love each other; let us show the truth by our actions." (1 Jo. 3:17-18 NLT) That exposes another popular myth about love – that we're capable of loving everyone. Only God is big enough to love everyone in the world. You and I aren't. I love a quote by C.S. Lewis about this issue, "It is easier to be enthusiastic about Humanity with a capital 'H' than it is to love individual men and women.... Loving everybody in general may be an excuse for loving nobody in particular." Because love is an act, not a feeling, love has to be demonstrated to be love. The best you and I can do is to be prepared to love anyone God brings across our pathway, but we don't actually love anyone until we do something for them that's practical and meets a need. One thing that has profoundly impressed me about our church are many examples I've seen over the years of meeting practical, down to earth needs in people's lives. Well done! Keep it up!

There's a wider application right there that's very important. Remember how that classic rock song goes: "I wanna know what love is/ I want you to show me"? As the culture around us becomes steadily less Christian, it's good to remember we can't argue people into the Kingdom of God. We can only show them. Someone has observed that people today aren't asking if Christianity is true; they're asking if Christianity is good. We have to show them. When we give of ourselves for the good of others, even for

those with whom we have differences, we show people what love is and what God is like. One of our evangelism strategies as a church is just to “do good.” In other words, find needs in the community and meet those needs. When we do that month after month and year after year, some in our community might become interested in Jesus.

Here’s another demonstration of real love that makes it easily recognizable. It treats all people with honor and respect. The Bible says, “Love each other... and take delight in honoring each other.” (Rom. 12:10 NLT) It also says, “Respect everyone.” (1 Pt. 2:17 NLT) Christians believe every human being is made in God’s image and is a person for whom Jesus died and rose again. As a direct result, every person deserves to be treated with dignity, honor, and respect. Right now, our political leaders are providing daily examples of treating other human beings – often their political opponents – with disrespect, with dishonor, and with no dignity whatsoever. It’s having a very negative effect on our culture as a whole. Wouldn’t it be wonderful if the Church – if followers of Jesus across our nation - could show the world a better way to talk about politics - a way characterized by respect, even for those with whom we have differences; a way characterized by honoring one another even if we’re opposed to their positions?

Here’s one more demonstration of real love that makes it easily recognizable. It finds ways to serve others. The Bible says, “God has given each of you a gift from his great variety of spiritual gifts. Use them well to serve one another.” (1 Pt. 4:10 NLT) If love is giving of ourselves for the good of others, then love means giving our time, talent and energy to and for one another. When a children’s ministry volunteer sits down with a group of kids on Sunday morning or Wednesday evening and helps them understand a Bible story, it’s an act of love. When we help Muslim children with their homework at Whispering Oaks or read to a child at Devonshire Elementary, it’s an act of love. When we fix stuff around the church building on Tuesday mornings, it’s an act of love. When we usher, when we greet, when we run sound or the projector, when we pray with those who respond to the invitation here on Sunday, it’s an act of love. When we faithfully tithe our income to this church’s ministry, it’s an act of love. When we help the other people in our discipleship triad follow Jesus better, it’s an act of love.

Where are you serving? In what ways are you giving of yourself to your brothers and sisters here at KRBC? Can I offer a paraphrase of a verse we looked at earlier? “If anyone has a gift and sees his or her church in need but does nothing to help, how can the love of God be in them?” It’s wonderful to be a friendly church - to smile at each other in the hallway and exchange pleasant greetings in the pew. But truly loving each other demands a bit more. Get busy for Jesus somewhere. You do that best by serving – by meeting needs. Real love is recognizable.

I read a story this week about the pastor of a small Baptist church who’d been praying regularly with other church leaders for one of their members. John hadn’t been to church in years, but his wife, Pat, attended their small congregation faithfully. Every Sunday afternoon before the evening service, the pastor and those leaders prayed for ways to communicate their commitment to John and his family. Be careful what you

pray for! It wasn't long before they received an answer. During the morning service one week, Pat told the congregation through tears that John had been diagnosed with cancer. A surgery was planned for the following week, and doctors were confident John would make a full recovery. The bad news was John would be out of work for months. He drove a log truck and was paid by the mile. There was no way he could recover while spending ten hours a day in a bumpy eighteen-wheeler. But if he didn't drive, John and Pat didn't get a paycheck.

The congregation sprang immediately into action. That afternoon the pastor and several church leaders met to discuss the situation. One leader, a trucker himself, bluntly asked everyone around the table, "How much can everyone give?" Some pledged \$50 or \$100 a month. One family committed to pay for utilities and another for groceries, whatever the cost. All bills were paid on time. There was a new supply of groceries on the front steps every weekend. Some of the men made sure the lawn was mowed and other maintenance issues around the house were addressed. John rejoined the congregation. Months after his surgery, he stood up and testified on a Sunday morning that the church's tireless care of his family had convinced him that the congregation didn't simply want another warm body in the seats or an extra dollar in the offering plate. They were committed to sharing their lives and resources with him.

True, real love isn't natural or automatic. Real love was first modeled by Jesus. As Jesus' followers, we're called to love like He loved. When the Holy Spirit comes into us that kind of love becomes possible. Practical, down to earth love. Love that honors and respects human beings. Love that serves and meets needs. In others words, love that's recognizable. It's really that simple, saint.