

1 John 3:16-24

¹⁶We know love by this, that [Jesus Christ] laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. ¹⁷How 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? ¹⁸Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action. ¹⁹And by this we will know that we are from the truth and will reassure our hearts before him ²⁰whenever our hearts condemn us; for God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything. ²¹Beloved, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have boldness before God; ²²and we receive from him whatever we ask, because we obey his commandments and do what pleases him. ²³And this is his commandment, that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us. ²⁴All 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.

John 10:11-18

[Jesus said:] ¹¹“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. ¹²The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away—and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. ¹³The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. ¹⁴I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, ¹⁵just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. ¹⁶I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd. ¹⁷For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. ¹⁸No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father.”

Grace to you from God our Father and our Lord & Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Christ the Good Shepherd. As I read this text last week, all I could think about were the images that we often see of Christ as a Shepherd... so many pictures exist of tragically beautiful, Caucasian Jesus with a perfect white lamb draped over his shoulders somehow not ruffling his luscious locks or besmirching his pristine white robe. Riiiiight. Because THAT is an accurate portrayal of an Ancient Palestinian SHEPHERD!

If we truly want to depict Jesus accurately then these images should show a dark and swarthy Jewish male who is grimy and dirty from sleeping outside and trudging around after animals. There's no telling what that lamb he has draped over his shoulders may have contributed to his robe. I'd imagine that Jesus smells just lovely! Christ the mucky, unwashed, greasy, odorous, good shepherd.

If you can't tell – I just wasn't feeling him this week! So instead of further regaling you with all that I find objectionable about Tragically Beautiful Caucasian Clean Shepherd Jesus, instead, I'm going to speak to you about my favorite television show of ALL TIME!

My favorite television show of all time is a show called is Gilmore Girls – any of you GG Fans out there? Gilmore Girls is known for its fast-talking characters who engage in witty banter throwing in ridiculous amounts of pop-culture references and modern life realities.

The show follows the life of Lorelai Gilmore, a single mother who had her daughter, Rory, at the age of 16. Lorelai came from a family of great affluence, but that affluence did not make her happy. In fact, she rebelled against it, and ran away carving out a new life for herself and for her daughter. Throughout the show the Gilmore Girls interact quite frequently with Lorelai's parents who are still engaged in that old life... there is a significant strain in their relationship because the priorities, beliefs, and realities of these characters differ greatly from one another.

At times you find yourself wondering – can they ever reconcile. Will they ever be able to come together and form some kind of loving and understanding relationship?

The community being addressed in our second reading this morning was experiencing similar dynamics. It is widely speculated and accepted that the books of 1, 2 & 3 John were written as a companion to the Gospel of John. These epistles were intended to bring clarification to possible and/or actual misunderstandings and misinterpretations relating to the Fourth Gospel.

This commentary of sorts, was written for a community that defined itself over and against the world around it. That rejected the traditional and familiar (much like Lorelai Gilmore rejected her status quo) to follow a new truth and a live a new way of life.

Those in this community considered themselves to be children of light and those outside to be children of darkness. With that said, there were still disagreements, differing priorities, beliefs, and realities even amongst the children of light. Hence, the need for these clarifying supplements.

What people in this early Christian community believed was truth differed from one person to the next, much like it does today. There tended to be two camps of people in this small Christian community– those who understood belief to be the most important aspect of faith and those who understood action to be the most important aspect of faith.

Both of these camps are addressed by the author of this text, who is often referred to as “the elder.” The Elder begins by stating that “We know love by this, that Jesus Christ laid down his life for us” – Belief. We know this. We believe this. Belief. Unless – you’re Jesus in which case... laying down your life is definitely a form of Action.

Moving on... “ – and we ought to lay down our lives for one another.” – Action.

“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?” – Action

“Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action. And by this we will know that we are from the truth and will reassure our hearts before God whenever our hearts condemn us; for God is greater than our hearts, and God knows everything. Beloved, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have boldness before God; and we receive from God whatever we ask, because we obey God’s commandments and do what pleases God.” – Ummm... Action & Belief... combined. Now he’s getting tricky.

“And this is God’s commandment, that we should believe in the name of God’s Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as God has commanded us.” Belief & Action... again.

The Elder points out that ultimately love is the root of both belief and of action. Love, belief, and action are not in competition with one another.

Theologian G.C. Berkouwer said this: “Faith is not a competitor of love and good works, but rather a sponsor, and gives foundation to them because it acknowledges the grace of God. Again and again for this reason, Luther pointed out the deep significance of the first commandment [“no other gods”] and accounted all works performed outside its sphere as nothing. This faith then moves on from loving God to loving one’s neighbor: ‘all one’s works must promote the welfare of one’s neighbor, since in his faith each has all the possession he requires and can therefore freely and lovingly devote his entire life to the service of his fellow human.’”

Believing in Jesus and loving one another are not two separate commandments but rather, one combined commandment. Love God and love neighbor... together.

Because ultimately it is God's love that we receive, that we are able to reflect and project to the world around us. The Elder states that we are to love our neighbors to the point of death – to lay down our lives for one another. Just like smelly, dirty, shepherd Jesus laid down his life for us.

Often when we hear statements like this it seems morbid and foreboding. I don't particularly want to die anytime soon and I don't imagine you do either. We're more like that field hand that runs away in the face of danger – because – self-preservation!

David Bartlett states that: "love to the point of death might mean, not just extreme moments of sacrifice, but in the daily give and take of the loving life."

How often do we give up something that we love, or that is important to us, or that brings us joy, for the benefit of another? How often in relationships do we sacrifice parts of our individual selves to live a more cohesive, harmonious and loving life with our partner? How often do we give of our time, talents, and treasures, to the benefit of the world around us?

Here at Grace I see it all the time... the WELCA groups that create Lutheran World Relief Quilts, prayer shawls, baby hats, booties, and mitts for our newborns, school kits, and so much more. The Out-Of-The-Cold Champions who organize safe spaces and meals for those experiencing homelessness in our community. The Green Team who give up tons of time to wash dishes each week so that we can be better environmental stewards. Our Super Wednesday Cooks. Our Choir members. Our musical ensembles. Those who go on both domestic and international mission trips. The Crop Walkers. The protestors. The noisy offering donators. I could go on for a very, very long time of all of the ways that I see members here sacrifice for one another and for our community.

Differing priorities, beliefs, and realities will always be part of the human condition. They will also always be a part of any faith community or family system. Issues like those portrayed in Gilmore Girls speak to audiences because they reveal so much truth about humanity and relationships. The Elder knew this – which is why he simply clarified that love is the root of belief and action.

Faith and belief inspire action. God's love for us inspires love of one another. Gathering in community helps to bolster our faith and sense of God's love. Feeding us and encouraging us to go out and share that love with the world around us. Gather – Feed – Send... Love God and Love Neighbor.

"Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth **and** action. And by this we will know that we are from the truth."

Amen.