

1 John 3:18-24. Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth. ¹⁹ This then is how we know that we belong to the truth, and how we set our hearts at rest in his presence ²⁰ whenever our hearts condemn us. For God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything. ²¹ Dear friends, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have confidence before God ²² and receive from him anything we ask, because we obey his commands and do what pleases him. ²³ And this is his command: to believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and to love one another as he commanded us. ²⁴ Those who obey his commands live in him, and he in them. And this is how we know that he lives in us: We know it by the Spirit he gave us.

Unity that creates community

A couple of weeks ago I saw a poster that was inviting caregivers to come together as a community to receive encouragement and loving support so that they could better carry out their callings of love and care. The poster had a picture of a cup - a coffee mug - wrapped up with a red crocheted cozy collar that was decorated words printed in white lettering. The message read, "*It's hard to pour from an empty cup*". The implication was that if you are called to show love and care it is important for you to be loved and to be cared for so that you could have ample love to give.

In our lesson and throughout his letter John makes a similar connection. In a sense John speaks encouragement to a community of believers as he seeks to fill up 'the cup' for his fellow believers so that we may overflow with Christ's love as we live lives of love. His entire letter that we know as 1 John serves as an encouragement to fellow believers to live a life of love. And thus, he reminds us frequently of the love of God. This very chapter begins with that wonderfully familiar verse, ***How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we would be called children of God. And that is what we are! - 1 John 3:1.*** With such words of love He encourages the community of believers repeatedly that Christ lives in us, the Spirit of God dwells within us, and therefore we are filled with the love of God. John encourages believers to love each other and found within and wound tightly around his encouragement he speaks of the love that Christ has poured out onto and into believers. **The unity that we have with Christ is vital to producing a loving community of believers.** Christ is the vine we are the branches. Connected to Christ we have life in him. Filled with the love of Christ we have ample love to share with others.

In the opening verses of this section, John urges the community of believers to watch out for an empty kind of love. ***Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth.*** Nowadays, critics of the Christian church love to point out that the church is filled with hypocrites who express such an empty kind of love. In their eyes Christians are quick to talk the talk, but slow to walk the walk. They might say that, *Christians speak of love, and living according to God's will, and living lives of love like Jesus*

did, but often they are not very loving at all. A particularly popular criticism of Christianity today is that, "They speak of sending their thoughts and prayers, but they lack a love that actually takes action."

Now, before we put up our armor and deflect or shoot down those criticisms, we admit that we are sinners and we are not perfect, and therefore we do have the tendency to speak in one way and live in another. And before we dismiss away such criticisms of hypocrisy we also know that there is a voice deep down inside of each one of us that screams that same criticism in a much more intense and personal way. There are certainly times in our life when our lives of faith seem lacking, shallow, even empty. We go to church. We read our bibles and have personal devotions when we make the time. We speak and sing and pray about love. We try our best to live Christian lives. But we all have our struggles. We struggle to obey God, we struggle to live lives of love. And so that voice inside critiques and criticizes in a way that stings much more sharply than any outside critic. The inner voice of guilt and regret makes our hearts heavy. *You speak about love but look at the unloving way you just spoke to your spouse! You hypocrite! You speak about love but look at how impatient and unloving you were with your kids! Look at the shabby way you treated your neighbor! How cruel you were to your brother! How unloving and just flat out mean you were to your co-worker!* And suddenly a beautiful gospel imperative because an overbearing an ugly demand. *"Live a life of love!"* The guilty conscience is quick to accuse. *"Ha! At best your life of love is nothing but an act and an empty shell!" Are you even a Christian, or a just a phony, a fake, a failure?* The voice inside is overwhelming, our hearts, our feeling, our emotions, are quick to convict and the devil swoops in to help twist the dagger so that we might question our very status with God. The devil does his best to drive us to despair.

Thanks be to God for the gift of his Word! At the Holy Spirit's directive John gives us the encouragement that we need for such a time as this. ***19 This then is how we know that we belong to the truth, and how we set our hearts at rest in his presence 20 whenever our hearts condemn us. For God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything.*** God is greater than our hearts! When our hearts condemn us, when feelings betray, when our cup seems empty, the word of truth is there to fill our hearts with the love of God. God's love abounds. God sent his Son for you. He knows what you have done, what you have left undone, and yet still the Son comes for you. He knows your unkind thoughts and your unloving actions and yet in perfect love Christ claims you as his own. He lived a perfect life of love. He lays down his life in love and takes it back up again to wrap you up in his love. God desires to dwell in you and to fill you with his life and love, and so he sends his Spirit in Word and Sacrament to you. He gives to you his promises one after another. He pours out upon you his undying pledge in baptism. You are mine. You are forgiven. You are loved. Nothing can change this wonderful gospel truth. In love God takes us back into the word, he takes us back to the font, and fills us with his love, he washes away our guilt, our doubt, and sets our hearts at rest before our loving God. God is greater than our

hearts as he fills us with his word of truth. He fills us with his love.

By God's gift of faith, we believe in Jesus. We believe, we know, we have confidence that we have good standing with God because of the redeeming work of our Savior. Our unity with Christ is daily confirmed and affirmed through the Spirit working through Word and Sacrament and therefore a Christian community is built. And before we even talk about our relationship to others that community starts with our connection to God. John speaks in this section and throughout his letter about this wonderful and mysterious connection we have with God through faith. There is both a unity and a community that we share with God. And while mysterious, this is very much in line with who our God is. This mystery has an intimate connection with the very essence of our God. In a way that we cannot fully understand the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, loved one another and experienced community and fellowship even before time began. Our triune God assures us that through faith we have a taste of this community with God right now, and that gives us a hunger for the fullness of fellowship with God forever in heaven. It is music to ears, and sweet honey to our lips, to hear and to say that God dwells within us. And as we live in his love and live in step with his commands we experience community and fellowship with God. Through this fellowship with God, we are united to the love and will of our LORD. He dwells within us and we in turn love him and desire to obey his will, and obeying his will means that we dwell in him, and he in us. John speaks of this kind of symbiotic relationship often and here he describes it this way. ²⁴ ***Those who obey his commands live in him, and he in them. And this is how we know that he lives in us: We know it by the Spirit he gave us.*** Our unity with God through faith in Christ produces and fosters our community with our LORD. Think of Jesus wonderful words. ***I am the vine you are the branches (John 15:5).*** We are connected to Christ. We are connected to his life, his love, his Spirit, his truth, and therefore, we are connected to each other.

Our unity with Christ produces a community with God and that realm of community extends into our relationship with fellow believers. A congregation connected to Christ, by God's grace, will be a community. Rather than a mere assembly of people who occasionally gather together because of shared beliefs and values, God calls us into a community of believers that he describes like loving family. Look at how John in his love for his fellow believers John calls them his dear children. Look at how he calls them dearly loved friends. Look at how John encourages them to live a life of Christian love that goes beyond words and tongue. And so within this community of believers let us live within this fellowship, this unity of faith, in a way that goes deeper than just a "Hi" on Sunday morning, but let us live within a realm of community that extends and flows, even floods into daily life. Filled with the love of Christ, such love will take action. This is the type of love that sends cards, that checks in, prays for and prays with a person who is home sick, or in the hospital, or who it seems could just use a call. It is a love that leans in a gives words of encouragement, donates a much-appreciated meal, who stops in and says hello, helps care for the kids, pitches in with household chores, gives a gift, supplies a needed item, completes a difficult task, or finds another way to relieve a burden, to lift a spirit, to express love among the members of this community.

Such love exists here among us. Lifelong friends, close family ties, quite often leads to close relationships and loving and helpful actions; but let us not forget to include those that are beyond bloodlines or who are relatively new to this community of faith. A word in the gathering place, listening and befriending, can go a long way. A carton of eggs delivered to a doorstep, a kind gesture, a loving act, can have a much larger effect than one might think. Let's be a friendly church as well as a church of friends, and a spiritual family. As we celebrate the fellowship that we have with God, let us celebrate the fellowship that we have with each other. Let us love and serve one another in ways that are helpful and pleasing to God, for connected to Christ he daily fills us full with his active love as he comes to us through Word and Sacrament. Filled up with the love of Christ our love will overflow to each other.

John was there in that upper room, he was there when Jesus said, ⁵ ***"I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit;"*** (John 15:5). With powerful words, and an unforgettable life, Jesus taught John and the rest the disciples how to love each other. He had shown them how to speak and how to act in love. John experienced the love of his Savior, he had known first-hand the community, the closeness, that Jesus had built with the disciples, and with those who believed in him. Jesus loved liked no other. He loved with words and actions, with unmatched compassion and kindness to all. Therefore, it was so very fitting, that on the night before he died he spoke to his disciples about love at length, teaching them with lasting pictures. **I am the vine you are the branches (John 15:5)**. On the night before he laid down his life in the ultimate demonstration of love Jesus gave to John, to the disciples, to the Christian church this unforgettable command. ***"A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. ³⁵ By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."*** (John 15:34,35)

The words of Jesus so perfectly paired with actions were powerful and they would leave a profound effect on John. It seemed that this theme of love for God and love for each other was never far from his heart as it was a seminal part of John's epistles, that he would return to time and time again. Imagine in these words how John - quite possibly the last living disciple at that time - speaks to the next generation of Christ's church as he passes down this legacy of love. Let us listen, let us be filled with Christ love, let us love one another. ²³ ***And this is his command, John writes, to believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and to love one another as he commanded us.*** Made secure in his love for us Jesus sends us out to show his love to each other and to the world. Unity with Christ creates and fosters community with God and within the family of believers. Dear friends, ***Believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and love one another as he commanded us.*** Amen.