

## Sermon for May 3, 2015 – Easter 5

1 John 3:16-20 (NKJV)

Theme: All You Need Is Love.

- 1) *Christ's love expressed to us.*
- 2) *Christ's love expressed through us.*

<sup>16</sup> *By this we know love, because He laid down His life for us. And we also ought to lay down our lives for the brethren.* <sup>17</sup> *But whoever has this world's goods, and sees his brother in need, and shuts up his heart from him, how does the love of God abide in him?* <sup>18</sup> *My little children, let us not love in word or in tongue, but in deed and in truth.* <sup>19</sup> *And by this we know that we are of the truth, and shall assure our hearts before Him.* <sup>20</sup> *For if our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart, and knows all things.*

In the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century researchers were trying to figure out why healthy babies in orphanages were dying at an alarming rate. Almost everybody thought it had to do with uncleanliness – but not researcher Rene Spitz. He had a different idea.

To test his theory he examined a group of orphan infants raised in isolated, hospital cribs and compared them to babies raised in prison by their incarcerated mothers. 37% of the infants isolated in the hospital died, but there were absolutely no deaths reported among the babies raised in prison with their mothers. They actually grew more quickly and did better in every way Spitz could measure. In contrast the isolated orphans who managed to survive were scrawny, showed obvious psychological, cognitive and behavioral problems, and were more likely to contract all types of illnesses.<sup>i</sup>

Can you figure out what caused this difference? No amount of sterilization or medicine could make up for the love the orphaned infants failed to receive. This research led orphanages to hire professional mothers to cuddle and love baby orphans - making a dramatic difference in their overall health and development. The infant mortality rate in orphanages dropped like a rock.

This story illustrates the truth that humans need love. It's an integral part of who we are and how God made us. The Bible says: *God is love.*<sup>ii</sup> Since man was created in God's image, he was created to both possess and express love. However, when man fell into sin, he ceased being in God's image. He fell from the love with which God endowed him at creation.

But Jesus died and rose again to restore in the believer the image of God that was lost when man fell into sin. With Saint John as our guide, let us consider the love Christ restored in our hearts, under the theme: **All you need is love.** 1) *Christ's love expressed to us.* 2) *Christ's love expressed through us.*

Part One: Christ's love expressed to us.

The love God expresses to and through us should not be understood as a mere emotion like “the warm fuzzies.” Yes, true love can involve such emotions, but it certainly isn't defined by them. No, true love is much less a feeling than it is an act of the will: a commitment, so to speak, to benefit another person regardless of whether or not I receive anything in return - even if it means sacrificing my life for them. One of the best descriptions of biblical love can be found in 1 Corinthians 13, where the Holy Spirit portrays it as a series of attitudes that shape a loving person's thoughts and actions.

Ultimate love makes the ultimate sacrifice – and no greater love can be expressed than what Jesus did for us; as the first verse of our text states: *By this we know love, because He laid down His life for us.*

As I mentioned before, love is part of the image of God that mankind lost when Adam and Eve sinned. Every person since then is born with a selfish nature – always asking “what’s in it for me” before acting to benefit someone else. This selfishness separated us from God’s love – making us objects of His wrath. And without God’s love, we would most certainly die in hell forever.

But here’s the amazing thing: Even though we (because of our sinful, selfish state) considered the LORD our enemy, God did not want us to die in hell. Even though we could offer him nothing in return, the LORD chose to love us to such a degree that he gave up his one and only Son to save us from our sins. Jesus once said: *"Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one's life for his friends."*<sup>iii</sup> And this is exactly what He did - not only for our sins, but for the sins of the whole world.

And the LORD’s love didn’t just stop there. No, He sent the Holy Spirit into our hearts through the preaching of His Gospel so that we, like infants held by their mother, might come to know His warm embrace and infinite compassion. He made our unwilling hearts willing to repent and believe the Good news of His forgiveness. Through baptism He adopted us into His family so that we might be the objects of His affection. He did this so that we might not die orphaned from Him, but grow strong as His children under His tender care.

All we need is love, and God expressed the love we need in Christ Jesus. We have become children of God through faith. And if we are God’s children, we are also children of love because: *God is love.*<sup>iv</sup> If this is who we are, then it is only natural for us to express love towards one another, as our sermon text says: *By this we know love, because He laid down His life for us. And we also ought to lay down our lives for the brethren.*

### Part Two: *Christ’s love expressed through us.*

On the night of His betrayal, Jesus said: <sup>12</sup> *"This is My commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.* <sup>13</sup> *"Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one's life for his friends.* <sup>14</sup> *"You are My friends if you do whatever I command you."*<sup>v</sup>

Jesus wants us to love others just as He loved us: willing to die for each other. But don’t let your love stop there. God also wants us to be willing to live for others, which can often be more difficult than dying for them. It is often easier for us to make great sacrifices for other people than every day little ones. Let me give a few examples of what I mean:

Husbands, I think all of us would be willing to die for our wives. Wonderful. But are we also ready to live for them? Are we willing to sacrifice a day of fishing with the boys to be at home, helping our wives out with little projects that need to get done?

Wives, you are willing to show concern and support when your husbands are going through tough times. That’s great. But, are you also willing to hold your tongue when they make minor mistakes that annoy you?

Parents, you are willing to work hard so that your children might have a better life. Awesome. But are you willing to sacrifice career advancement to spend time with them at home?

Members of Immanuel, if a major issue arises in our congregation, you all express interest and are ready to help any way you can. That's good. However, are you willing to come to meetings, encourage each other, and be involved in our work even when there are no major disasters on the horizon?

You see: Love is not only expressed in how you die, but also in how you live for each other, as our sermon text states: *whoever has this world's goods, and sees his brother in need, and shuts up his heart from him, how does the love of God abide in him?* <sup>18</sup> *My little children, let us not love in word or in tongue, but in deed and in truth.*

Merely saying that we are willing to sacrifice ourselves for each other means absolutely nothing if our actions don't prove it. So prove your love by living for each other!

You might think: "When the opportunity arises, I will prove it." Well, every moment of every day we have opportunity to show love. The problem is that these opportunities seem so insignificant and unglamorous that we often don't take them – not realizing how impactful they actually are. And trust me: showing love in little things is often just as meaningful as making great sacrifices. How so? Because God himself works in even our simplest acts of love (like giving someone a glass of water) – glorifying his saving name in ways we can't even begin to comprehend.<sup>vi</sup>

So don't just say, "Christ's love is in my heart." Express it in all the little acts of kindness God gives you opportunities to perform. For example:

Spend time after Church talking to a visitor or fellow member with whom you don't normally associate. Who knows: this simple act of kindness might just be the encouragement your neighbor needs.

Don't just tell someone that you'll pray for them, but do it, and do it often.

Don't just tell a person going through rough times, "If you need anything, give me a call." (I mean, honestly: who of us would feel comfortable enough calling someone for help?) No, if you see a brother or sister going through rough times, ask them what their specific needs are, and, if you have the means, help them out as soon as you can.

Great sacrifices and little kindnesses summarize the total love Christ expresses towards us. This is also the kind of love He wants us to express towards others – all to the glory of His name.

Brothers and sisters in Christ: have you loved others as you ought? I confess that I haven't. When I think about all the opportunities to love that I have either wasted or ignored, it depresses me to such a degree that I begin to wonder: "Am I really a Christian? I certainly don't seem to be acting like one. I can be so insensitive to the needs of others. Why am I so selfish?"

Now, another Christian might say to me: "You aren't so bad. Look at some of the good things you have done." and then go on to show me acts of love that I didn't even realize I was doing. But still, I feel guilty for all the things I should have done, but didn't.

Have you ever felt this way? If you have, then take comfort from our text: <sup>19</sup> *And by this we know that we are of the truth, and shall assure our hearts before Him.* <sup>20</sup> *For if our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart, and knows all things.*

No matter how much guilt we feel, the LORD knows the truth. He knows that we aren't perfect children. We are spiritual toddlers - constantly falling as we learn to walk. Yes, the LORD sees our sin and guilt, but He also hears our sighs of confession and forgives us for Jesus' sake. He also sees the things in our heart that we do not see - like the new man He placed in us at our baptisms: a holy and righteous "me" created in Christ's image to do the good works God prepared in advance for us to do. Even though we still possess a sinful, selfish nature God knows this is not who we are. We are His children, purchased and purified through the blood of Christ from all sin. When we sin and turn to the LORD in repentance, God is greater than our hearts - having both the ability and desire to forgive our sins and help us overcome our weakness. Yes, God is greater than our hearts - no matter how much they condemn us. He is always expressing His great love to us through the Gospel so that, having received such great mercy through faith, we might express that same love towards others that we ourselves have received from God.

Brothers and sisters in Christ - children of the heavenly Father. Let us love one another: not just in word or in tongue, but in deed and in truth - always looking for opportunities to help and build each other up. "How can I do this?" you might ask? All you need is love: Christ's love expressed both to you and through you. Yes, all you need is love, the love of Christ is all you'll ever need. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> The introduction was taken from an online National Geographic article:  
<http://phenomena.nationalgeographic.com/2013/07/31/the-orphanage-problem/>

<sup>ii</sup> 1 John 4:8,16 (NKJV)

<sup>iii</sup> John 15:13 NKJV

<sup>iv</sup> 1 John 4:8,16 (NKJV)

<sup>v</sup> John 15:12-14 (NKJV)

<sup>vi</sup> cf. Mark 9:41