

Testify to Love
1 John 4:16b-21; 3 John 2-8
November 15, 2020

A group of professionals posed this question to a gathering of 4 to 8 year old students: “What does love mean?” Rebecca said, “When my grandmother got arthritis, she couldn’t bend over and paint her toenails anymore. So my grandfather does it for her all the time, even when his hands got arthritis too. That’s love.” Billy, age 4, said, “When someone loves you, the way they say your name is different. You know that your name is safe in their mouth.” Terri, age 4, said, “Love is what makes you smile when you’re tired.” Bobby, age 7, said, “Love is what’s in the room with you at Christmas if you stop opening presents and listen.” Some thought-provoking ideas to consider with our scripture.

God is love, pure love. Ponder that for a moment. God is love. As love, God invites us into loving relationship. “Those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.” I like to savor, ruminate on that word, “abide.” Abide is one of the Gospel of John’s favorite words. Jesus said, “Abide in me as I abide in you.” In other words, “Make your home in me just as I make my home in you.” What a lovely thought to make our home in God, to dwell with God, to live with God and God living with us. I see an image of two rocking chairs on the front porch, side by side, God and I dwelling together, soaking in the beauty of one another’s presence. Words aren’t even necessary; there is an understanding, a sense of the bond of love between us.

I hope you’ve had that sense of God’s presence in your life, a constant companion walking side by side with you in the deep difficult valleys and scaling the steep mountaintops of life’s journey. God takes the initiative in loving us, in befriending us, in drawing us into the intimate circle of God’s family. That’s who God is and what God does. You have a place in the loving heart of God, and God desires a place in your heart. Abiding in God is abiding in love.

The experience of God’s love isn’t meant to be an island unto itself. It’s a love to be shared, as you well know. The letter goes on, “We love because he first loved us.” Having tasted the love of God, we can’t help but share it. It is too good to keep to ourselves, and there is plenty to go around. Our love of God is visible in our love for our kindred in Christ. We testify to the love of God we’ve received by displaying our love of God and our love for neighbor.

Testifying to love in word and deed is important, for we often learn of love from those who model it. Everyone who ever loved us, or is loving us now, has shown us how to love. We all have love in us. Being loved shows us how to

manifest it. We practice showing love by imitating those who have shown us love. We listen to a friend who has been hurt by someone else and we respond, “I’m so sorry you are going through this.” We’ve learned because someone was empathetic to us once when we were in pain. These caring connections show us how to love and are ways in which we testify to love.

As a seventh grader, David had a newspaper route. Each morning, in the early light of summer or the cold dark of winter, the newspaper truck would toss a bundle of papers tied with twine on the sidewalk in front of his house. David would search for a shard of glass – in those days, the streets were littered with them – and use it to cut the twine before putting the papers into his shoulder bag.

In the afternoons, on the way home from school, David would often stop to say hello to Jenny through her first-floor window across the street from his house. She was a kindhearted neighbor who had cancer and was unable to walk. One day, she reached into a pocket of her flowered dress and handed David an aluminum ring with a sharp hook on it. She explained that it was meant to be worn on one’s finger to cut through a piece of twine or rope.

David realized that she had been watching him scout around each morning for broken glass. She found a way to get him a tool that would make his task easier. The boy was so surprised, so grateful. Into his later years, David has not forgotten that gift of caring connection.ⁱ Jenny’s loving awareness was a model of love that young boy chose to imitate in his own life.

We love because God first loved us. We imitate God’s model of self-giving love in Jesus. That’s why and how we testify to love. We feel fulfilled spiritually when we show love, no matter how others respond or act toward us.

One discipline to help us grow in testifying to love is daily reciting a set of aspirations.

- May I love myself as I am today.
- May I be happy and healthy.
- May I be safe and secure at home and work.
- May I harbor no unkind thoughts or engage in aggressive actions.
- May I be even-minded and serene, no matter what happens to me today.
- May I keep practicing loving kindness, compassion, joy at others’ success, and equanimity.ⁱⁱ
- When love is not the same between us two, I’ll be the one to show more love to you.ⁱⁱⁱ

These aspirations or others are spoken for oneself, then for those we love, then for those to who are mere acquaintances, then for those with whom we

have conflicts, and finally for all beings everywhere. It is a way to abide in love, to abide in God who is love, and to witness to the love that propels our lives.

The way of love is not always an easy path to walk, and yet, it is the most fulfilling way we will ever know. Because we know it is difficult, we need companions to model love and to uphold us in walking this path. We recognize that we need the Christian community to help us embody the love of God as given witness by Jesus. We long to abide in love and abide in God. The Christian community is committed to watching over one another in love. We strive to model love worthy of being imitated. We seek to spur one another on to grow in love of God and neighbor. Our gifts to and through the church are an expression of our love of God, our love for our companions in this way, and our longing to grow in love. The ministry of Christ continues through the church. And we find that the more we give, the more we receive in return.

Bishop Michael Curry tells of Ruth Miller, a parishioner in his father's church. She hemmed and washed the vestments for the acolytes who light the altar candles and passed the offering plate. When he became an acolyte at age five, they didn't make acolyte robes that small, so he spent what felt like a lot of time standing on Ms. Miller's dining room table. She patiently took measurements and made pleasant conversation. Michael was fascinated by her two prosthetic legs, which attached below the knee. She was slow but she could get around pretty well.

It wasn't until later when he was in seminary that he learned her story. In the 1940's she had lost her legs in a house fire. While she recuperated in the hospital, she fell into a dark depression and was struggling to understand what future she could have without legs. She didn't know if she'd ever be mobile again. She was visited by her parish priest at the time. "Father Brown," she pleaded, "if only the Lord will heal me, I'll find a way to serve him."

When she got her prosthetic legs, she was delighted just to be able to stand and walk across a room again. Figuring that God had made good on his side of the bargain, she thought seriously about how she would do the same. Ms. Miller made her living as a seamstress, so she volunteered to take charge of the church's vestments for the acolytes and choir children. Over the years, all the church children became her children.

When Bishop Curry came home one Sunday, she revealed a side of herself that he could not have understood as a child. "I got prosthetic legs, but you were all my boys. You'll go places I'll never go," she said, tearing up with pride. "But your legs are my legs. Wherever you go, I go. God has given me legs I never knew

I had.” Living out her promise, sharing her gifts, had healed her in a way she could never have seen all those years before in her hospital bed.^{iv} Through her life and the legs of those boys she served, Ms. Miller testified to love.

How is God calling us to testify to love these days? The upcoming holidays will likely be lonelier for many. Who needs to receive loving kindness from us? What daily aspirations will motivate us to be mindful of testifying to God’s love in word and action?

May we so imitate the love of Jesus that our love make people smile even when they are tired!

Gracious God, we are grateful participants in the dramatic story of your love. Jesus has drawn us into his fold, teaching us his ways, challenging us to grow in love, modeling the path of justice. We are grateful for his leadership in our lives and we yield our energies to follow in his footsteps.

Therefore, we consecrate our pledges for the ministry of First United Methodist Church of Santa Rosa in 2021 that the work of Christ might continue and flourish among us and through us. With these gifts we align ourselves with your love and your loving kindness. In this moment of silence, receive our recommitment to the ministry of Jesus Christ and your way of love.....

Empower us to testify to your love for so many who bear the stress of these days. We give thanks for teachers who continue to adapt that they might impart knowledge and life skills to students. We pray for strength for health professionals who offer sacrificial service that all might be well. We pray for the well-being of essential workers who meet our daily needs for food, electricity, water, phone service, and more. Refresh the hope and perseverance of those who are unemployed, those who fear eviction, those who struggle to feed their children.

As we reflect upon your love, inspire us to be more loving to one another. May our loving actions move us toward a reversal in the spread of COVID-19. May love guide us toward appreciation of varied strengths as we pool our resources to work for the common good. May love open our eyes to the beauty of one another, especially persons of color who have too often been shunned.

Align us with your love, O God. Free us from the negativity and resentment which erect barriers. We open our hearts to be filled with your love that we might shine with your light and love. In Js’ name we pray as he taught us....

ⁱ David Richo, *How to Be an Adult in Love: Letting Love in Safely and Showing It Recklessly* (Boston: Shambhala Publications, Inc., 2013), pp. 124-125.

ⁱⁱ Ibid, pp. 34-35.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid, p. 2.

^{iv} Bishop Michael Curry with Sara Grace, *Love is the Way: Holding on to Hope in Troubling Times* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2020), pp. 115-116.