

Legacy of Love
1 John 3:1-3
November 1, 2020

Last week I was with one of our church families for a small memorial gathering. Observing the two generations that gathered, there was a remarkable family resemblance between uncles and nephews. I trust that the resemblance went beyond physical features to the qualities and inward character of those kinfolk.

Our scripture speaks of our status as kindred of God, children of God. As children made in the image of God, we are love, as God is love. When we love, we bear a family resemblance to our Divine Parent. Our life calling is to live in love and leave a legacy of love.

On this All Saints Day, we contemplate the life beyond life experienced by our loved ones who have died. Our scripture tells us that what we will be has not yet been revealed. A ray of hope is offered by the promise that when Christ is revealed in his fullness, we will be like him. With this hope, we seek to model our lives after Jesus, who left us a legacy of love. We have the power to determine who we are now and how we will continue Jesus' legacy of love.

Mother Teresa said it this way. "I am not sure exactly what heaven will be like, but I know that when we die and it comes time for God to judge us, he will not ask, 'How many good things have you done in your life?' Rather he will ask, 'How much love did you put into what you did?'" How much love did you put into what you did?

A thirty-year old man with leukemia was having an urgent conversation with his doctor. He said, "I don't think I'm afraid of death. What I am really afraid of is the incompleteness of my life." Deep down, that is what all of us fear, that we are incomplete, that the story of who we are supposed to be is never finished. Fear comes from the sense that there is not enough, not enough to finish the story, not enough time, not enough strength, not enough joy, not enough love, not enough me, not enough grace. We're afraid that when the end comes, there will only be darkness, an empty chair, a bare table, an unfinished story. "What I'm really afraid of," said the young man, "is the incompleteness of my life."ⁱ

Jesus said, "Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matt. 5:48). The Greek word for perfect is better translated complete or whole or undivided. In Jesus' day it was typical for people to let their love be divided, looking down on those thought to be morally inferior or hating their pagan enemies. Their love

was incomplete, because they withheld it from parties with whom they disagreed or judged as unrighteous.

If this sounds familiar, it is because it is a common human struggle. Our love is often incomplete, parceled out to some but not to all. I try to remind myself that the one who is most difficult to love has the most to teach me. That one is my growing edge, stretching me to examine those parts of myself that I can't embrace. When my love for another is challenged, there is part of me that is incomplete. It is impossible to feel whole or complete when our love is divided.

We see this playing out on our national stage in many ways. Some are deemed worthy of justice, while others are not. We are not always putting a lot of love into what we do.

This day we remember the legacies of love left by members of our church and personal families. They have been our mothers, fathers, spouses, sisters, brothers, grandmas, grandpas, aunts, uncles – they have been channels of love. They have been disciples of Jesus, seeking to follow in the way of love, living out love in their being and their doing. They have served their communities and country. They have delighted in music, antique cars, dancing, backpacking, sailing, travel, hospitality of home and heart, humor, church potlucks, camping, telling stories, and much more. We rejoice in the legacy of love they have left for family members, friends, and for the communities that they touched.

Undoubtedly, at times they stumbled along the way, picked themselves up, and continued the journey of life. Circumstances drove them off the beaten trail where they wandered until they could find their way back to a life-giving path. At times, they probably struggled to love with their whole heart, mind, soul, and strength. We recognize and embrace their humanity, and move toward forgiveness where necessary and healthy. We claim for our memories those occasions when their love was undivided, strong and compassionate, leaving a legacy of love to cherish and which continues to shape us today.

Jesus' legacy of love and the legacies of our ancestors prompt us to consider the legacies we as individuals will leave for others. This unsettling season in our nation calls us to consider the corporate legacy we wish to leave for future generations. Do we wish to tear each other apart? Will we deepen our compassion for those who differ from us? Will we recognize the deep change that is necessary to align our systems with the reign of love? Jesus is our model, humbling himself to take the role of a servant. He considered the welfare of others, not simply his own. He acted in love to serve the common good, which in turn would improve the lives of those whom he loved.

Research has revealed that groups only exist when we put the “we” before the “I,” when we accept responsibility for the common good. Groups whose members are altruistic, who are always willing to aid one another, are stronger than groups whose members are not altruistic. When we focus on loving one another, on serving one another, we all are stronger.

This congregation has cultivated a legacy of love for 166 years. You have been shaping disciples of Jesus for generations, shedding the love of God in hearts and upon the paths of many. Today our world is desperate to hear of the love of God as we experience it in Jesus. Our commitment to continuing the ministry of Jesus through the church is vital.

Rev. Otis Moss recently shared with Krista Tippet a story his father told him about Howard Thurman. “When Thurman was a small boy, he saw an elder, a man who must have been in his eighties, who was planting pecan trees. Young Thurman raised a question. He said, ‘Sir, you’re not gonna be around. You will not live long enough to taste the fruit from these trees.’ The old man paused and said, ‘Son, all my life I’ve been eating from trees I did not plant. It’s my job to plant for somebody else.’” Otis’ father said, “Just plant. There will be trees that you will never see grow, that someone else will eat from. And it’s their responsibility to plant for somebody else. And so we don’t have all that we should have, we’ve not reached the goals that we are supposed to reach, but we have started the race, and you’ve got the baton, son. Pass it on.”ⁱⁱ

What we will be in eternal life after earthly life is yet to be revealed. But while we are still here, as children of God, we are called to live in love, to love God, love our neighbor, and love ourselves. Every morning as we consider the day ahead, we might consider who to put love into everything we do. We are called to rise above the fray and not permit love to be divided, parceled out to some and withheld from others. We are here to plant trees today that will feed generations of tomorrow. We inherited Jesus’ legacy of love, passed along through the ages. Now it is our turn to cultivate love, true love, generous love, life-giving love that the world might see our family resemblance to our Divine Parent. Let us live in love, for love, and with love.

Divine Lover, your very essence is love, a love which you generously share with your creation and humankind. We rejoice in the many ways that we experience your love. We are grateful for opportunities to express our love for you through worship, loving acts of kindness, a word of affection, a note of support.

Forgive us, O God, when our love is divided. Restrain us from contributing to the animosity in our nation. Help us channel our energies toward lifting up those who have been beaten down. May your church, the Body of Christ on earth today, be a beacon of your gracious, unconditional love for all.

Guide our nation as significant choices are made. Move us toward the reign of justice and light that you envision for your people. Stir us to action on behalf of the good of all, to prevent the spread of COVID-19 and the devastating consequences it has had on your people.

We pray for your healing power to abide with all who suffer from COVID-19 and other illnesses. Replenish the energies of parents, teachers, students, health care professionals, and essential workers as they serve their families and communities. Offer your loving care to those who grieve the death of loved ones. Grant courage to those making changes to grow toward health and wholeness. We pray in the name of Christ, the Healer. Amen.

ⁱ Thomas G. Long, "Numbering Our Days," Preached at Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church, New York, May 24, 2020. Distributed by *Journal for Preachers*.

ⁱⁱ Otis Moss, III, "The Sound of the Genuine: Traversing 2020 with 'the Mystic of the Movement' Howard Thurman," October 15, 2020, <https://onbeing.org/programs/rev-otis-moss-iii-the-sound-of-the-genuine-traversing-2020-with-the-mystic-of-the-movement-howard-thurman/>

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