

Love is A Verb
I John 3:16-18; 4:7-12
November 8, 2020

As our Stewardship Team met to consider a theme this year, one member brilliantly asked, “What does the world need right now?” As the old Hal David song says, “What the world needs now is love, sweet love. It’s the only thing that there’s just too little of. What the world needs now is love, sweet love, No not just for some but for everyone.”

There’s just too little love right now. I’m recording this message on Wednesday, November 4. By the time you hear it this weekend, the dynamics in our nation may be very different. At this point, one thing is clear: our nation is deeply divide. How are we as Christians to respond to this moment in time? How does our faith in Jesus Christ instruct us to stay grounded in the midst of crisis?

It is likely that the first Epistle of John was written for a community that knew and loved the Gospel of John. There was a schism in this community of faith, some breaking away and regarding themselves as the “true” believers. The call to love is a means of holding together the remaining community. But love doesn’t mean “anything goes.” Love of God and love of neighbor are not two independent actions. We can’t choose one and ignore or contradict the other. The ethic of love demands that our love of God give rise to love of others. As Jesus embodied sacrificial love, followers of Jesus are to demonstrate love not just in word or speech, but in truth and action.

Love was Jesus’ strategy. The way of love was not without great cost, but Jesus’ way of love helped and healed, lifted up and liberated people, all without hurting or harming. Later Gandhi called it “pricking the conscience,” disarming your oppressor with behavior so loving that he can’t help but feel the wrongness of his hate and open his mind to new possibilities.ⁱ 90

Martin Luther King, Jr., understood that the way of love requires discipline. He asked those who marched alongside him to commit to Ten Commandments of Nonviolence.ⁱⁱ Nine of these are reminders of the spiritual principles that would keep them grounded in the nonviolent way of love. It is worth revisiting these commandments for the living of these days. They synchronize well with the passages from I John.

1. **Meditate daily on the teachings and life of Jesus.** To follow Jesus it is vital to know Jesus, to study his teachings and soak in his examples.

2. **Remember always that the nonviolent movement seeks justice and reconciliation – not victory.** The biblical prophets make it clear that God loves justice. A Psalm to God declares, “Mighty King, lover of justice, you have established equity; you have executed justice” (Psalm 99:4). God keeps covenant with God’s people by doing what is right, especially for those who are vulnerable. When justice is executed, people can move toward reconciliation. This is very different from conquering another to claim victory. Loving action seeks justice and reconciliation.
3. **Walk and talk in the manner of love, for God is love.** A well-known proverb suggests that before we speak, we ask, “Is it true? Is it kind? Is it necessary?” I often slip and speak before I ask these questions and end up wishing for a do-over. When I answer these questions before speaking, I’m more likely to walk and talk in the manner of love.
4. **Pray daily to be used by God in order that all people might be free.** This commandment reminds me of the Wesleyan Covenant prayer. “I give myself completely to you, God. Assign me to my place in your creation. Let me suffer for you. Give me the work you would have me do. Give me many tasks, or have me step aside while you call others. Put me forward or humble me.”
In prayer we open ourselves to be filled by the Spirit of God to be used as a conduit of God’s purpose, of God’s justice, reconciliation, and love.
5. **Sacrifice personal wishes in order that all people might be free.** There have been critical moments in history when people sacrificed for the common good. America is trapped in a rut of rugged individualism where we’re not inclined to sacrifice our personal desires for anyone else. In contrast, the nonviolent way of love requires that sometimes we temper our personal desires to contribute to the good of the entire community. That’s what our current public health guidelines are meant to do. Jesus laid down his life in love for us; most of us will not have to lay down our lives, but we can make sacrifices that foster love for all.
6. **Observe with both friend and foe the ordinary rules of courtesy.** Each day brings opportunities to build up or tear down, to unite or divide, to provoke anger or express compassion. We can choose the way of love even among those with whom we disagree.
7. **Seek to perform regular service for others and for the world.** Studies have shown that volunteering increases a person’s energy, sense of

mastery over life, and self-esteem. Helping others not only makes a difference in their lives, but also in our own.

8. **Refrain from the violence of fist, tongue, or heart.** Most of us probably don't have trouble with the first, but violence of the tongue, mind, or heart may be another matter. I've been asking myself more frequently, "Is what I'm doing or thinking helping or harming?" If my thoughts or actions are harming me or another, I try to let them fade from consciousness.
9. **Strive to be in good spiritual and bodily health.** Self-care is foundational to the ability to love others.

Martin Luther King's Commandments of Nonviolence remind us of tangible ways we can practice love in truth and action. Our nation is in need of great healing in many dimensions. These principles can guide us toward transformation and reconciliation.

An old story tells of a mother with two dearly loved daughters. However, from their earliest years the girls would quarrel with one another until their enmity hardened into estrangement in adulthood. This caused the mother great pain.

One year she had an idea that might bring her daughters back together again. She wrote a letter to them both, sharing how very much she loved them and longed for them to love each other with great love. She wrote of her grief over their separation. She shared news of herself, and offered guidance on how they might live happier, more loving lives themselves.

When complete, she wrote out one copy for each daughter, but each letter was unique. Each copy contained only every second sentence of the original letter. One daughter received only the even sentences; the other daughter received only the odd sentences. Neither copy made sense on its own, nor contained the fullness of the mother's message.

When the daughters received their letters, initially they were puzzled until they figured out what had happened. Then they faced a dilemma. In order to know what their loving mother had written, they would have to put their two letters together and read them as one. That meant that they would have to approach one another again in mutual respect.

For a long time, the mother waited in vain for a response. Each daughter asked questions. Each tried to make sense of the half-letter she possessed. Each

daughter believed that her mother loved her more than she could possibly love her other daughter.

Then one day, when the mother had almost given up hope, there was a knock at the door. The daughters stood together. “We’ve come home,” they said. “We’ve finally put our letters together, and we’ve come to say how much we love you, Mum.” She flung her arms around them both, tears of joy streaming across her cheeks, and welcomed them back home.ⁱⁱⁱ

The story may seem too much like a fairy tale only for a world of make-believe. But if we truly believe that with God, nothing is impossible, and if we allow God’s love to abide in us and dare to put love into action, God’s love just might be perfected in us and through us. The way of love is not easy, it is sometimes messy, but it is the way of God. May we seek to live in love as people who are dearly loved by God.

Holy Love, we are grateful for your expansive love that knows no borders, no barriers, no end. When our love fails, your love remains steadfast. When our minds are narrow, you open up possibilities beyond measure. When we become cynical, your Spirit exhilarates us with fresh hope. Thank you for loving us so immensely, so deeply, so passionately. We love you, O God, and we desire to grow in love of ourselves and of our neighbor.

We pray for our nation, moving through a multitude of stresses. You know the disagreements and division which haunt us. We seek the powerful presence of your Holy Spirit in our midst, mending broken hearts and lives, repairing systems that have caused harm, and reconciling damaged relationships. Help us to be still, and await your divine guidance as we move forward. Teach us to be patient with one another, listening to different perspectives. Motivate us to find common ground upon which we can sustain life together.

We pray for all persons elected to public office. Grant them the gifts of wisdom and cooperation. Guide them to be peacemakers. We pray for the health and strength of medical professionals and first responders who care for us. We seek the well-being of veterans who have served our nation. Offer your protection to all who continue to offer themselves in sacrificial service to the common good.

Lead us forward in your way of love, a way of life in harmony with your vision for all people and all creation. Grow our understanding of our interconnectedness on this fragile planet. Teach us to build bridges where there is division. We pray in the name of Jesus, who reconciles us to You, O God....

ⁱ Bishop Michael Curry, *Love is the Way: Holding on to Hope in Troubling Times* (New York: Avery, 2020), p. 90.

ⁱⁱ *Ibid*, pp. 91-94.

ⁱⁱⁱ Margaret Silf, *One Hundred Wisdom Stories From Around the World* (Oxford, England: Lion Publishing, 2003), pp. 153-154.