

## 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter Greater Than Our Hearts April 25 2021

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing unto You, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer! Amen!

In our Preschool we have learned another song, "Our God is so Big." It goes:

My God is so big, so strong and so mighty there's nothing our God cannot do.

My God is so big, so strong and so mighty there's nothing our God cannot do.

He made the trees, He made the seas, He made the elephants too!

My God is so big, so strong and so mighty there's nothing our God cannot do.

There's nothing our God cannot do! (for you!)

There's nothing our God cannot do (for you!)

The focus of our sermon this morning is our Epistle reading, 1 John 3:16-24. And in it, John is essentially telling us the same thing, that God is so big, and strong, and so mighty there's nothing that God cannot do. He made our bodies, He made our minds, He made our hearts and souls to! So, don't live in fear and don't live in guilt, Christ died on the cross to free you!

Hear John's words again:<sup>16</sup> By this we know love, that Christ laid down his life **for us** (and we are saved), and (in response) we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers. <sup>17</sup> But if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him? <sup>18</sup> Little children, let us not love in word or talk, but in deed and in truth.

Now, if this seems like hard Law that we can never do perfectly, then you are seeing it correctly. But remember, God's work of salvation has already been completed for you by Jesus. This work of loving our neighbor is a post-salvation response that John is exhorting us to. And John continues, saying:

<sup>19</sup> By this we shall know that we are of the truth and reassure our heart before him; <sup>20</sup> **for whenever our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart, and He knows everything.**

This again, is sweet Gospel to our ears. God knows everything about us, our most secret things we have done, thought, or felt. He knows us better than we know ourselves. And yet, knowing all this, Christ still died for us (Romans 5:8).

So, when your heart, mind or conscience convicts you, look to this for comfort: God is stronger than all these things. Let go of these things and be renewed and washed clean. God promises when we confess these things that trouble us, He is faithful and just to forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness (1 John 1:9).

John continues,<sup>21</sup> Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence before God (this is the clean conscience promised when we repent or turn to Him or confess our sins);<sup>22</sup> and whatever we ask we receive from him, because we keep his commandments and do what pleases him (Thy will be done).<sup>23</sup> And this is his commandment, that we believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ (through faith received by grace for salvation) and love one another (as a response), just as he has commanded us.<sup>24</sup> Whoever keeps his commandments (to believe in the person and work of Jesus Christ) abides in God, and God in him. And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit whom he has given us (the Holy Spirit who engenders our love response).

These verses from John's first letter are often difficult. He oscillates between these seemingly contradictory statements. We are perfect, we are not perfect, we obey His commands, but if we don't obey we have an advocate with the Father. (First Gospel, then Law, then Gospel and back to Law). He seems to be talking to two different people, could it be a sinner and a saint?

We are more used to the conversation he has with the sinner, but this is Easter and we need to grow into the conversation he is also having with the saint. For as people who have experienced resurrection power, we are also empowered by the Holy Spirit to be the very people that God has called us into being. This salvation, this washing away of sins and rebirth, God's love for us, should bring about a change. We should not be born again to a new man same as the old man.

The text has a number of important intersections with this day. First of all, from our Gospel reading, we know the voice of our shepherd not by its tone or its pitch, but by the love. He laid down his life for us. That love then transforms us into people who also lay down our lives for others. That is the way of Christianity.

There are lots of ways to lay down one's life, martyrdom is only one of them and a gift which is not given to all. More commonly we are called to lay down our life one dollar, one moment, one act of kindness, and/or one act of service at a time. It is a long and beautiful laying down of life, a long obedience, which stretches over years and scores of years. We practice to develop new habits. The old ones still reoccur. We are a work in progress.

John points us to the sharing of our material things. Back to the idea that Peter and John walked into the temple that day and looked at a beggar and unlike so many did not simply walk by. We may not have the ability to heal one like him, but we can feed him. God's love abides in us and opens our hearts and eyes and minds to be different sorts of people.

This living, active, love of God is what connects us to the truth. For John, belief is never separated from the act. If one does not believe that Jesus came in the flesh, then the human flesh becomes someone much less important. It would be as if the beggar's hunger is not really shared by the Jesus who was stressed and hungry and came to fig a tree looking for fruit or who had compassion on the crowds who were gathered in the wilderness to hear him. But if you do believe that Jesus came in the flesh, suddenly the beggar's hunger becomes one with the Lord's hunger. They are the same hunger and his hunger is a holy thing, a holy need, and when we feed the hunger of the beggar, we are also feeding the hunger of our Lord.

But that paragraph often condemns us. We know our hearts; we have not acted in Christ's love, not all the time. But the God who dwells in our heart is greater than our heart, and the love He has for us is not bought or sold. It is simply given and by his indwelling we have it. Too often we hold ourselves up to an unrealistic expectation. We see Mother Teresa and wonder why we don't love that way. But then we ignore the fact that we do love one another, with a halting, sometimes broken, but genuine love which comes from God. That means God **is** in our hearts, and He is bigger than our hearts and the self-condemnation which we feel. The past is past, and the present is real, and in this moment as He presents to us yet another opportunity to love, we are able to love right now with his love.

Then God sets our minds and hearts at ease. He has forgiven the past and He has **gifted** us the present. And so we know that God abides in us. **Not** because we have done it right, but because in this moment He empowers us to do something, even a little loving deed. And that is God at work in us.

Reach out and hold the hand of the sinner next to you, tell your spouse you love them, give your kids a hug, feed a hungry man, comfort a grieving widow, or pray with a man going into surgery, and know the presence of God is there through you in those things. This is not you getting it right, it is God getting it right. He came into the flesh because these and all the hurts of the world are terribly important to him.

He has taken suffering to himself. We saw that in Good Friday and we have seen it in other Gospel stories as well. Jesus grows weary, He hungers, He thirsts, He is anxious, and of course He dies. The ancient church father, Gregory of Nazianzus, once said that whatever was not taken up by Jesus has not been healed or saved, but that which has been united to God has been healed and saved. Jesus took up our infirmities (Is. 53).

This means that the infirmities of our neighbors, the weakness and the sickness, the dying and the suffering, connects us to Christ. It is not just something that we will leave behind when we go to heaven. Jesus is fully human in heaven today. He has taken up humanity. That suffering of our neighbor is connected to Jesus right now. Jesus tells us in Matthew 25 that even a cup of cold water given to a little one in his name is given to Jesus.

Herein lies the great motive for the many things that Christians have done throughout the centuries and continue to do today. It doesn't have to be something dramatic and grand. The hand on the shoulder of a hurting person is not a small thing, as Jesus noted, the simple cup of cold water is a gift to him. Look to the little acts of kindness that undoubtedly abound in our congregation today. Call them good.

John says that those who believe in Jesus' name and love, however halting and imperfect that love may be, have someone dwelling in their hearts who is greater than all the guilt we may be feeling for the many times we have failed.

That one in-dwelling us, of course, is the Jesus whose name we confess and whose love lives within us. He sets our conscience at ease and He is the one who empowers our love for this moment.

It is easy for us to point to all the times we have failed to love. No one can say they have always loved. Yet John speaks of confidence and the reassurance of the heart. It is the God who has taken up residence in the lives of his people who is greater than even our own condemnation. He knows us, knows us better than we know ourselves. But he has not stepped away from us in disgust. He has united himself to us in the physicality of the Sacraments, pouring his blood and his body into our mouths so that we have become the vessels of a heavenly treasure, a treasure that spills out into our neighbors' lives.

Jesus does not base his love for us on **our** past, but on **His** past. Today He offers us the opportunity to look like, act like, think like, and love like his sheep. You are given the opportunity to love with **His** love the unlovable people in your life. It is not easy, but He loves through you. He shepherds his flock this way too.

The presence of Christ is not to be judged by the sins of His people. He has always been gathering a scurvy lot around himself and today is no exception. The presence of Christ is found in His grace to those very people and then in the gracious acts of those He gathers, the forgiveness spoken, the hungry fed.

And just as we are forgiven and fed today. We also can be His gospel people for the world around us. He is here, right now, to do something about our lack and our selfishness. He is here to change all that with His love. He is here in his Word and Sacrament. He is here in the Confession and Absolution. He is here in you from your Baptism. God is in you as His word carries the Holy Spirit into your hearts. And He wants you to carry Him forth **with** you as you encounter your neighbor everywhere you go.

And may the love of God and the grace of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit abide in you now and to life everlasting. Amen!