

Text: I John 3: 16-24
Title: Love's Consequence
Date: 04.25.21
Roger Allen Nelson

Ted Lasso is a comedy on Apple TV that tells the story of an American football coach going to England to coach a Premiere League soccer team. Hilarity ensues. It's delightful and winsome, with a kindness, or sort of human tenderness, at its core.

At times Ted Lasso, the main character, will get stuck on the sound of a word. And the more he says it the more the word loses its meaning. It just becomes a sound. He tries all sorts of inflections, but somehow the word has lost its meaning.

I think the same is true for "love."

Love is so ubiquitous that it loses its meaning. We use the word for so many things. I love tacos. I love Sandi. I love Hope Church. I love my grandson, Jack. I love Ted Lasso. I love chocolate chip cookies. I love Jesus....

Seriously? All of that with the same word? It just becomes a sound. It loses its meaning. When we love everything how do we love anything? Using their Greek names, C.S. Lewis writes that there are four loves. Only 2 of those types of love are actually mentioned in the New Testament, but in John there is even less nuance. Some form of *agape* (love) gets used about 45 times in this little five chapter letter/sermon thing....

So, what is the meaning of love?

Can we get past the ubiquity of love to something tangible, clear, real?
To the sermon savvy can we say anything fresh or meaningful about love?
What is the definition or consequence of love?

What if we come at it this way?

Last week we read,

*Look what love the Father has lavished on us that we should be called children of God!
And that is what we are!*

We pick up today with John writing: we know that lavish-outlandish-love because Jesus laid, or set down, his life for us. Love is defined as the self-emptying of Jesus; and therefore, love for us means laying down our lives for one another. To do otherwise, to hold our lives, suggests that we don't know, or don't embody love.

Well, as it turns out, our translation sanitizes what John wrote. A more literal rendering reads:

Whoever has the life of the world and sees his brother in need and yet locks up his intestines from him, how can the love of God remain in him?

Stan Mast describes our translation as colorless. In his words:

...it literally means "to close, or shut, or bar your bowels." The ancients saw the bowels as the seat of emotion because when we are emotionally moved, our intestines are moved. We feel love in the pit of our stomach or our bowels are roiled with anxiety or we are moved to feel pity at the pain of another. John says, if you have the ability to help another Christian and you take the time to really see him in his need but you "bar your bowels" from feeling anything for that brother, "how can the love of God be in you?"

One consequence of being a child of God, one defining mark of love, is that we won't be constipated but our guts will flow with compassion for others. We won't be bound-up with worry or judgment or pride or stinginess, but we will see others, first as fellow children of God, and then with empathy we will follow the lead of Jesus in laying down our lives for them – that's love's consequence.

May God give us the courage to be faithful to this high calling.
May God give us the grace and strength of that love.

Listen again to our text:

This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for one another. If any one of you has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in you? Dear children let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth.

Which brings to mind a wonderful moment in the "Fiddler on the Roof."

Tevye and his wife, Golde, are preparing for their daughter's wedding – who's marrying a man she loves. The marriage of Tevye and Golde was arranged. They first met on their wedding day. So, now, years later, Tevye asks Golde if she loves him. "Do you love me?"

She's annoyed. She tells him to go lie down. "Maybe its indigestion."
He's undeterred, "Golde, I'm asking you a question. Do you love me?"

Golde responds, "Do I love you? For 25 years I've washed your clothes, cooked your meals, cleaned your house, given you children, milked the cow. Why talk about love now?"

Tevye persists. He remembers how they met. He remembers being told that they would learn to love one another. And now he wants to know.

Golde finally answers, "Do I love him? For 25 years, I've lived with him, fought with him, starved with him. 25 years my bed is his. If that's not love, what is?"

Dear friends, I'm sure there's all sorts of different "love languages," but love is finally neither words nor sentiment, but cooking, cleaning, listening, fixing, walking with, remembering to flush, making the call or writing the note, praying, visiting, giving, studying, organizing,

etcetera, etcetera and turning our faces away from our own interests toward the interest of the others.

The consequence of being a child of God is the daily sacrificing of self for the sake of the other. And, there are no restrictions because of age, or intellect, or theological certainty for that high calling. There's no expiration date or excuse note. There's no gift that's deemed too insignificant. The only thing of consequence is the lavish love of God and our requisite willingness to turn toward others, unlock our guts, and love in action and in truth.

Barbara Brown Taylor puts it this way:

...the hardest spiritual work in the world is to love the neighbor as the self – to encounter another human being not as someone you can use, change, fix, help, save, enroll, convince, or control, but simply as someone who can spring you from the prison of yourself, if you will allow it.

Dear friends, how then do we unlock our innards to love in action and in truth?

When we live in a wired-immediate-graphic-cellphone-video-village how do we love? John and Jesus knew only the immediacy of neighbors, or the sojourner that came through town, or the widow around the corner, but we're overwhelmed with powerful-haunting images of the children of God in all manner of need.

In a world where everyone feels like our neighbor and yet we may barely know our neighbors how do we not go numb and get stuck in powerlessness? How can we be faithful to this high calling to lay down our lives? How do we unlock our innards to love in action and in truth?

It seems to me that our text points us back toward Jesus. While the Greek translation here is a little shaky, our translators have set up sort of parallel tracks.

This is how we know what love is....

And, a few verses later,

This is how we know that we belong to the truth....

The instruction or guide is to set our hearts in Jesus – to believe, believe, or belong to him – and to love one another. And as he lives in us and we live in him, the Spirit bears witness....

Therefore, how we love grows out of our life together in Christ.

As we are united with him in communion, we are called together to lay down our lives. And we need one another to navigate what's love and what's truth. We need one another to address both systemic issues and respond to individual needs. We need one another to work upstream with policies and political systems and to work downstream where people just need to be pulled out of the water.

In some manner our involvement and commitment to the CRC and World Renew, and organizations like International Justice Mission, or the Center for Public Justice, or Roseland Christian Ministries is an attempt to love at both ends of the stream. It may feel like we're spitting into a tsunami but Hope's participation and partnership with such organizations is part of loving in action and in truth.

Look. This text is without narrative arch, internal tension, or mystery. Every kid in Sunday School knows that the answer is God, Jesus, and love. The ubiquity of love makes for a vanilla sermon. (Yes. God is love. We should love more. Hmmm. What's that Medema kid's name? Don't forget to get a half gallon of milk on the way home. Oh. Yeah. Love....)

And I guess there are all sorts of ways to love and all sorts of examples of love. To quote Wilco, "Love is Everywhere." But as the followers of Jesus Christ, we're offered this example, this definition, and this consequence of love.

*Look what love the Father has lavished on us that we should be called children of God!
And that is what we are!... (therefore) Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue
but with actions and in truth.*

Dear friends, beyond the ubiquity of love, who can you love in action and in truth in this coming week?

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit.
Amen.