

**SERMONS FROM ST. MATTHEW'S  
"A COMMUNITY OF HOPE"**

# **The Truth of Action**

**Fourth Sunday of Easter**

**May 3, 2009**

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**1 John 3:13-24**

**D**o not be astonished, brothers and sisters, that the world hates you. 14 We know that we have passed from death to life because we love one another. Whoever does not love abides in death. 15 All who hate a brother or sister are murderers, and you know that murderers do not have eternal life abiding in them. 16 We know love by this, that [Christ] laid down his life for us--and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. 17 How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help? 18 Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action. 19 And by this we will know that we are from the truth and will reassure our hearts before him 20 whenever our hearts condemn us; for God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything. 21 Beloved, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have boldness before God; 22 and we receive from him whatever we ask, because we obey his commandments and do what pleases him. 23 And this is his commandment, that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us. 24 All who obey his commandments abide in him, and he abides in them. And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit that he has given us.

When I was a boy, my mother told me about a story that appeared in the local newspaper about two boys who were playing on a railroad track near where we lived. They heard a train coming, and in trying to get off the tracks, one of them somehow got his foot stuck. His friend managed to get the first boy's foot free in time to push him out of the way, but not in time to save himself, and he was killed.

We can only imagine how this event might have affected the two families. The family of the boy who died lost a son, but they at least, perhaps, had the comfort of knowing he had died heroically saving the life of his friend. The family of the boy who was rescued must have been profoundly grateful. But at the same time they probably felt some sorrow for the other family's loss.

It could be that this event brought these families together in ways they had never imagined. If it did, their closeness wouldn't have been based on what usually brings two families together: shared interests, or values or social status or neighborhood. It would have been based on the inescapable truth that one boy had died to rescue another from certain death. It would have been based on the truth of action, not on anything else.

I told this story of the two boys to bring home to us the enormity of what Jesus did for us in his death on the cross. I think we lose its magnitude for two contradictory reasons. On one hand, Christ's crucifixion for our sins 2,000 years ago sometimes seems so distant, so foreign, and so strange that we wonder what this event during the Roman Empire could possibly have to do with us and our lives today. On the other hand, Jesus' crucifixion is so familiar that if we're not careful we take it as a given, a piece of the furniture here in church. Make no mistake about it: Christ did for us what that second boy did for the first on the railroad tracks fifty years or more ago. He died to rescue us from certain death.

That's what Jesus himself tells us in our gospel reading: he is the good shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep. In his letter, John tells us, "**We know love by this, that [Christ] laid down his life for us--and we ought to lay down our lives for one another.**" Jesus died to rescue us from certain death, every bit as much as that one boy did for the other. Sin brings eternal death, and Jesus took that death sentence in our place.

Jesus' death for us is what lies under everything John says in his first letter. As I pointed out two weeks ago, what makes Easter so powerful is Jesus' death for our sin. We can't fully appreciate the power and glory of the resurrection without absorbing the truth of Christ's action in dying to rescue us from certain death. And as Chuck pointed out last week, it's Christ's resurrection power that makes us children of God and gives us power and incentive to live as God's obedient children, instead of walking away from our status as children of God by disobeying him.

This morning we've come to the part of 1 John where John shows us specifically what that obedience looks like in action. We come to the truth of action, specifically the truth of Christ's action in freely giving his life to rescue us from certain death, and in the truth of our action towards one another. John

comes back to Jesus' death for us in verse 16 when he defines God's love: **"We know love by this, that [Christ] laid down his life for us--and we ought to lay down our lives for one another."** You may recall that John is writing to people who have been influenced by false teachers or leaders. These people had somehow been minimizing the seriousness of our sin, or denying it altogether.

But this kind of thinking leads to a disastrous chain of consequences: If we deny our sin, then we deny that Jesus needed to die to rescue us from our sin and the certain death it will bring. And if we deny that Jesus needed to die for our sins, we're cutting ourselves off from the forgiveness, cleansing, and eternal redemption he pours out on those who come to him. We walk away from the eternal power of Christ's resurrection from the dead to fill our lives and enable us to grow in obedience and love for God and in love for our neighbors. These false teachers or leaders were cutting themselves off from Christ's love.

Not only that, they had separated themselves from John and the apostles. In the words of the New Testament, they had gone out of the Church and into the world. There is no in-between. By denying their own need for Christ, they had aligned themselves with the corrupt world system that sees its only salvation in itself.

Apparently John's readers were experiencing some hostility from people outside their Church, either these false teachers and their followers, or unbelievers in general. But that's not surprising. In verse 13, John says, **"Do not be astonished, brothers and sisters, that the world hates you."** After all, Jesus told the disciples, **"If the world hates you, be aware that it hated me before it hated you."** (John 15:18) It took me a long time to realize that Jesus' command to treat others as we would want to be treated wasn't a way to get them to treat me the way I wanted to be treated. Behaving kindly towards others is no guarantee they'll treat you the same way.

The world hated Jesus because he called them to account for their hostility to God. Jesus wasn't crucified because of his lack of political awareness or as a victim of circumstances. He was killed because the corrupt world system could not tolerate his shining the clear light of day on humanity's sinfulness, whether that sinfulness was in everyday morality, or in the political system, or in the religious establishment. He knowingly laid down his life for the very people who hated and killed him. He died for them.

The world's attitude towards God hasn't changed. We regularly see Christians misrepresented as intolerant or ignorant in the entertainment or news media. Frequently we see distortions and misrepresentations of Christianity and its doctrines represented as the truth of what Christians believe. Movies and TV

frequently ridicule and belittle Christians and their values and lifestyle. Angry factions within our own denomination often denounce other Christians in hateful terms. How are we to respond to the sinful actions and attitudes of the world towards Christ and towards Christians?

I think it's clear that even when what others do is clearly abusive and offensive, we cannot respond in the same way. We cannot use the misbehavior of others as an excuse to misbehave ourselves. What did Jesus do? He laid down his life for his enemies. He calls us to do the same. Remember 1 John 3:16: **“We know love by this, that [Christ] laid down his life for us--and we ought to lay down our lives for one another.”** If we allow hatred and anger to direct our actions, we are living not in love, but in hatred. John tells us in the second part of verse 14: **“Whoever does not love abides in death.”**

When we are abused and misrepresented, we must lay down our lives by enduring and praying for those who are attacking us. That is love—the truth of action. It is action that costs something. What does enduring in the face of abuse, ridicule and misrepresentation cost us? It costs us the right to respond from our angry impulses. It costs us the death of our sinful desire for revenge. How do we respond to the needy? By thinking positive thoughts about them and praying for them, or by giving them what they need?

In reality, both responding to hostility and to the needy are the same. Both involve giving people what they truly need. We give the hostile attacker what he or she needs: forgiveness, prayer and mercy. We give the poor and hungry what he or she needs: food, shelter, or employment. Why? Because they deserve it? No Because Jesus gave us what we needed, but did not deserve: rescue from the certain death of our sins.

Jesus defines love for us in the truth of his action on the cross. We owe it to our brothers and sisters—literally, that is our debt to them—to love them sacrificially. We are like the members of the family of the boy who was rescued that day on the railroad tracks. The family of the boy who lived owed the boy who gave his life for their son a debt of gratitude they could never repay. That's what we owe to Christ and to our brothers and sisters—all those who name the name of Christ, or who come into our lives.

John tells us what we can expect when we give up our selves for others. In the first part of verse 14, he tells us we'll have concrete evidence of our salvation in the truth of our actions: **“We know that we have passed from death to life because we love one another.”** And should we doubt, should we *feel* guilty and condemned, the truth of our actions in response to the truth of Jesus' actions for us is greater. In verses 19 and 20 he says that by loving one another in

the truth of action “**we will know that we are from the truth and will reassure our hearts before him 20 whenever our hearts condemn us; for God is greater than our hearts.**” The truth of God’s action in Christ is greater than our own ideas of our unworthiness. Thanks be to God!

Let us pray.

Lord Jesus, you went to your death to rescue me from certain death. Pour your Spirit into me to give myself for my brothers and sisters that your resurrection life and power may shine out of my life and be seen by all those around me. Amen.