

The Heart of Your Faith

John 10:11-18

Intro

In our opening passage, Jesus tells us who he is, and, because of who he is, how he will respond when those who are under his care, are in need. This roll and these responsibilities are not forced upon him: they are simply who he is and, therefore, how he lives. Jesus sets the example: how will we follow? Will we? The scripture reads this way.

John 10:11-18

11 'I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. ¹²The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away—and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. ¹³The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. ¹⁴I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, ¹⁵just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. ¹⁶I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd. ¹⁷For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. ¹⁸No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father.'

I John 3:16-24

Intro

The second passage reiterates a line of thought that we offer up every week (and is very much intimated in our first passage): love your neighbor as yourself.

More times than not, we hear the call to live this way from our own personal perspective. This means that too often we leave people to deal with their own business (you know, because it's their life and not ours)...unless they come and ask for assistance and then we'll see what we can do.

However, the importance of this theological foundation of the faith (which we get wrong way too often!) did not develop in a vacuum. The people who became those first Christians had to live out this ethic under some extreme circumstances.

Last week, we heard a passage in Acts that talked about Peter confronting 'the Jews'.

Well, by the time this particular letter was written, the Christian faith had a toehold and was spreading throughout the Roman Empire. Therefore, the greatest pressure being applied not by the Jews but by the Roman authorities themselves. Christians were considered the 'hatred of the human race'. That's a quote from a Roman historian who lived in the first century. The treatment of Christians worked off of that basis.

Christians were persecuted: they had their properties confiscated and were thrown into jail (if they were lucky), or they were killed in whatever the popular method of torturous death happened to be in the particular part of the Roman world they happened to live in. It might not have been constant pressure,

but the fear was always there in the back of one's mind. That is the sort of environment that Christians are called to live out their faith.

What I find absolutely reassuring is that it is under these conditions that our author writes things like, "we ought to lay down our lives for one another" and "let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action."

And the author is not just speaking about how Christians are to treat one another: he's talking about how believers in Jesus Christ are to treat everyone (including those who no longer want you to be alive!). The words of the Great Commission as written at the end of the Gospel of Matthew ("Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you." (which, from a perspective of faith, is the greatest way to display your love for neighbor, whether they be friend or foe)) are intended for all people, not just the folks you like, or who agree with you.

Who among us today would want to sign up for that? Yes, we were just reminded that Jesus did this very thing through our first passage. But especially when the world starts looking at you like some sort of a pariah, do we feel equipped to take that on?

It's not an easy question to answer, but by answering it honestly, you are able to begin to discern the heart of your faith. The scripture reads this way.

I John 3:16-24

¹⁶We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. ¹⁷How 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. ¹⁹And by this we will know that we are from the truth and will reassure our hearts before him ²⁰whenever our hearts condemn us; for God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything. ²¹Beloved, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have boldness before God; ²²and 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. ²⁴All 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.

"The Heart of Your Faith"

This past week, I stumbled on to an article that speaks to the secularization of the church, especially in the northeast. The author, who is a pastor somewhere here in New Jersey, talks about how the church, especially over the last 50 years, has swung its doors open to 'people from all degrees of faith'.

Said another way, people, regardless of where they may be on their journey of faith, are welcomed into the church.

I think that's a good thing.

Jesus reached out to people where they were. He challenged them but still welcomed them. Like I said, that's a good thing.

However, what the author rightly points out, is that people who are not as committed to a faith in Jesus Christ can also end up moving the church to a place where secular values become part of the accepted norm within the community of faith. To quote the article, “secular values emphasize ‘the bottom line’, while spiritual values believe ‘everything will come to us if we set our mind’s on God’s kingdom first’ (Matthew 6:25-33)”.

All of us have known churches where this struggle takes place.

I’ve had those sorts of thoughts firmly ensconced in my head as I started to listen to what was being said through this passage in I John.

What I saw in these verses was the author’s uncompromising stance of, ‘we will stand where our Lord and Savior has called us to stand, regardless of how that may set us in conflict with the ways of the world. We will love: even to the extent of loving our enemies. We will serve others, whoever that other may be and we will step out in truth and action in such a way that the world around us wonders, ‘what’s the matter with them? Don’t they see that what they are doing is contrary to how the world tells us to live?’”

That is what our passage this morning declares to all those who will listen. The question is, are we listening?

As you look at the state of the mainline church, and maybe it’s especially in in the northeast (or maybe we just happen to be the leading edge), the answer has to be a clear and resounding, ‘no’. All we have to do is look around at the churches in our own communities and what we see, by and large, are churches who are trying to maintain ‘the bottom line’, as opposed to stepping out and serving in ways that leave us in lock-step with the Savior who showed us the steps we needed to take.

And again, what was it that Jesus said to his Disciples in the Great Commission? What is the action step that all Christians should compare their actions both as individuals and as the community of faith by?

“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.”

Not ‘stay put and maintain’, but ‘Go! Go and baptize! Go and teach! Go and serve! God and love as I have first loved you!’.

To put it another way, there are too many people who think that being a Christian means you go to church on Sunday. Let me assure you, if that’s all you think it is, it isn’t. Going to church once a week may identify you as religious; it doesn’t identify you as faithful to the life that God is calling Christians to lead.

Look, I totally get that there are different opportunities that are offered through this community to engage those muscles of loving others as we were first loved, but the reality is that in this country, with all of the freedoms that we still have, we tend to forget, or at the very least minimize, what being a follower of Jesus is all about. It’s not about following the Golden Rule of ‘do unto others as you would have them do unto you’. In that set up, it’s all about you: treat others the way *you* want to be treated.

To follow Christ means that you go out to love and serve others, regardless of how they may respond to you, because that is how God would have you live. They may slap you across the face, but you reach out in service and love anyway.

The people who were reading the letter that we heard from this morning, did not have that kind of luxury of massaging what it meant to live as a Christian. Their backs were up against a wall and they had to decide what was really important to them. Do you believe or not? Will you follow the example that was set by the Good Shepherd? Will you live out that belief, or will you relent under the pressure of the standards and expectations of the world? What is at the heart of your faith? Is it about you, or is it about God?

The author of I John reminds us all that it should be about God and if it's about God, then we have to allow ourselves to move into areas that may be uncomfortable to whatever our secular sensibilities may be. Very simply: living a life of faith is not a life that blends unrecognizably into the world: it is a life that ultimately helps to redefine the world around you into that which closer to the kingdom of God.

So how do we do that?

Well, first and foremost is that we need to recognize that our initial and predominate reaction is to shy away from that which is of God. We are sinful creatures and if left to our own agenda's we will tend toward the path that leads us in opposition to the Almighty. That's where we go. I think that the author of I John is speaking so strongly because people were doing that very thing: walking away from God, so that their own temporal betterment might be realized.

We have to fight those inclinations. We have to go before God in prayer, yes as individuals, but more importantly as faith groups who pray with one another and for one another. An amazing thing happens when you begin to live out your faith in community: more and more, you start standing up and reaching out in the name of Christ. In many ways, it's like anything that you would practice: the more that you work at it, the more that you live it, the more that it becomes a part of you, and the more that is able to emanate forth from you, especially in those times of trial.

So first, recognize those sinful inclinations.

Then pray: individually and collectively, pray that you walk closer with God. Be bold about it! Turn it over! Be unambiguous! God, let me walk with You! Today! Open the door!

Last week we talked about who we are: a child of God. Daughters and sons of the living God. These steps are part of claiming that identity. Claim it!

Finally, step out and act, living out the call that has been placed before all disciples to "Go ... and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that [Jesus has] commanded [us]."

Basically, allow God to be at the heart of your faith. Follow the example that was set by the Good Shepherd. When you do (not if, but when), not only will you discover that regardless of the trials that may come before you that you will be held up, but that the Kingdom of God will be championed.

As Christians, our goal should not be some earthly 'bottom line', making sure that the doors are able to stay open.

Instead it should be what is at the heart of the Christian faith: the recognition that God has called us to serve in love ...no matter how ridiculous our worldly prognosticators consider it to be.

What's at the heart of your faith? Allow it to be a radical dependence on Jesus Christ. Allow your faith to be of God.

After Sermon Prayer

Holy and gracious Lord, You have called for us to have You at the heart of our faith. It can be so hard to do this. The world pushes at us in so many ways and we are so easily led in the wrong direction by our sinful nature. Lord, help us to have You at the heart of our faith so that in everything we do, Your kingdom, and Your kingdom alone is championed. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.