9-23/24-17 Rev. Amy Haines

1 John 3:11-24 Won’t You Be My Neighbor Series

Connecting with our Commission

Those of you with military experience… what do you think of when you hear the term “military commission”? When I googled “military commission” I found it interesting to be given two very different definitions. The primary definition was the official document conferring a specific rank on an officer in the armed forces. The other definition was the court organized in times of war to try offenses not subject to court-martial.

In reality, both definitions have something to do with instructions and duty. One commission is a call to new instructions and the other commission handles the consequences of not following instructions.

If you were to simply google “commission” you will find a third definition, yet one that can pertain to those in the military as well as those who have never served. That definition is simply an “instruction, command, or duty given to a person or group of people.”

This morning, as we complete our sermon series on being Christ-like neighbors reaching out to our neighbors near and far, God’s Word once again offers us our commission, our marching orders, our instruction on how to live as those who follow Jesus. Our commission is as profound as it is simple: love one another.

Love one another. In all that we say, in all that we do, our foundation, our motivation, and our interactions all are to be grounded in love.

And not just any love. Our love ought to reflect the one whom we follow. Our love ought to reflect the one whose name we claim. Our love ought to reflect Jesus, who himself reflects the love of God in this world.

1 John 3:16 is almost as powerful a reminder as John 3:16. John proclaims: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.” 1 John proclaims: “This is how we know love: Jesus laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters.”

Our love for one another is to be grounded in Jesus’ sacrificial love for us. Again, this is God’s agape love lived out through the Son. This is the unconditional, unmerited, unselfish love of God for all of humankind. We cannot return such love; we can only respond to God’s agape love through our love of God and love of neighbor.

In the first century church, death was a very real possibility for those who claimed the name of Jesus. Nowadays, however, most of us will never be asked to sacrificially lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters. When I think of those who do risk their very lives for others, I think of first responders, who will face fire or flood to save the lives of others. We have seen that recently in the Texas flooding and the Oregon wildfires. When I think of those who do risk their very lives for others, I think of missionaries who proclaim the gospel in hostile lands.

John Stroman once met a young woman who was an agriculturalist from the University of Minnesota serving in the Peace Corps in Ho, a remote region in northwest Ghana. In John’s conversation with the woman he discovered she had been working with the Ghanaian farmers in developing new crops, and she was going home for a few months. She said she looked tired and somewhat haggard. That region of Ghana was very isolated and she had been sick and had suffered through malaria. Yet after her visit to the US, she planned to come back to complete her three-year term. John asked her, "Why do you do it? Why do you give up your career back home to go to such a remote area and work under such extremely difficult conditions?" Her answer was simple, "Because I love the people."

--adapted from John Stroman “Making Love Visible” sermonsuite.com

Not all of us are called to be missionaries. Not all of us are called to be first responders. Yet we are all called to love others, because God first loved us.

Are we ever off the hook for loving our neighbor? John would answer with a resounding no, not if we are to claim the name of Jesus. So how do we love one another in practical ways, as a response to Jesus’ unconditional love for us? 1 John says it bluntly in verse 17:

“If a person has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need

and that person doesn’t care—how can the love of God remain in him?”

There are many ways we can live sacrificially that has nothing to do with our physical lives. We can live sacrificially with our time. We can give sacrificially through our finances. We can sacrificially put the needs of others ahead of our selfish desires.

Here John talks about caring for others through our material possessions. He is not talking here about the luxuries of life, the money we spend on restaurants and vacations and electronic gadgets and fun. Instead the Greek term is about the bare necessities, what it takes to sustain our lives. If we have food in our pantries and a roof over our heads and reliable transportation and we refuse someone in need, John wonders how we can say we have the love of God within us. The Greek term for seeing our brothers and sisters in need is not a casual glance, but a careful examination. John wonders how we can ponder the needs of others and still refuse to give. Finally, the Greek translated here as refusing help or not caring or having no compassion on another, has the meaning of feeling no emotion, no pity, no compassion or care.

So taken all together, John is challenging Christians then and now to feel something in the core of who we are and do something with whatever we may have if we see another in need and claim to have God’s love within us.

Professor Stan Mast says this about the love we are to have one for another:

..Love is more than merely understanding the problem of poverty. It is more than being moved by compassion for the poor. It is more than being able to talk a good line about what love requires. Love means actually doing something about the needs of your brother or sister. Love takes what you have in your own life and goes to work with it to alleviate the needs of a fellow believer. John calls us to take pity on the poor not as a guilt trip, but as a labor of love in response to Christ’s labor of love for us.

--Stan Mast 4-20-15 cep.calvinseminary.edu/sermon-starters

How well are we doing at that, really? In our individual lives, in our congregation, in the church universal? Are we consistent in our love for others reflecting God’s love for us? Or do we run hot then cold then hot again, or just lukewarm, halfheartedly caring for others only when we feel like it?

Honestly, I know there are times when in my own life I may run hot then cold then hot again.

I get passionate for loving my neighbor, then I get frustrated with those same neighbors when they don’t respond the way I hope they would, then I want to give up and never leave the house, then God taps me on the shoulder and renews my passion for loving my neighbor. And the cycle starts up all over again.

Unfortunately, ask anyone on the street their opinion of the church or of Christians and too often their response is not positive. In our world today Christians are known more for what we are against rather than who we are for. We are seen as living by hate not love; judgement not grace; selfishness not generosity. Or we look no different than the world around us when we have a countercultural message to share. Or we say we love God and love neighbor, yet our actions don’t back up our words.

I will never forget years ago when Pastor John Daniels said, “If we as the body of Christ really knew how to love, our churches would not be empty. People would be running to our doors if we really knew how to love.”

This is not a new struggle. It was happening in the early church. It is happening now. And it was happening over 100 years ago.

.. Over 100 years ago, the Christian philosopher Søren Kierkegaard made the point that Jesus was looking for followers, not admirers — he wanted people who would walk with him, do his work, and serve in his name.

One of Kierkegaard’s own parables told of a man who was walking down a city street when he saw a big sign in a window that said, “Pants pressed here.” Delighted to see the sign, he went home and gathered up all of his wrinkled laundry. He carried it into the shop and put it on the counter. “What are you doing?” the shopkeeper demanded. “I brought my clothes here to be pressed,” said the man, “just like your sign said.” “Oh, you’ve got it all wrong,” the owner said. “We don’t actually do that here. We’re in the business of making signs.”

We don’t do these things, he was saying. We just talk about them. And that, said Søren Kierkegaard, is often the problem in the church. We advertise ourselves as a place that is showing Christ’s love and doing Christ’s work. But when people show up looking for real love and real Christian action, they don’t see it. “Oh, no, we don’t love people here. We just talk about loving people here.” -- homileticsonline.com 5-7-06 “Get in the Box”

For six weeks, we have heard God’s Word remind us that our primary commission as Christ followers is to love one another. In this way they will know we are Christ’s disciples. We are to love another just as Christ loved us. The greatest commandment is to love God. The second commandment is to love our neighbor. We cannot do one without the other.

For six weeks we have talked about how much God loves us, and how we are called to love all God’s children, near and far, young to young at heart.

Yet it is not enough to simply talk the talk. We must also walk the walk. What we sing about on Sunday we are called to live on Monday morning. What we study in Sunday School and small groups ought to influence our relationships with family, friends and strangers. We are called to reach out to our neighbors more than for one fun event.

So one of the most important verses in today’s passage is verse 18:

“Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.”

..Clarence Jordan in his Cotton Patch Version of the Bible, translated verse 18 to read:

“My little ones, let’s not talk about love. Let’s not sing about love.

Let’s put love into action and make it real.”

 -- Homileticsonline.com 5-7-06 “Get in the Box” adapted

Eugene Peterson in *The Message* declared:

“My dear children, let’s not just talk about love; let’s practice real love.”

Just as love of God and love of neighbor are two sides of the same coin, faith and action must go hand in hand. We must live what we say we believe. What we believe ought to influence how we act. Our private love of God is to be lived out in our public love of neighbor. And as I said last week, The cross calls us to both a vertical love of God as well as a horizontal love of neighbor. One without the other is an incomplete faith.

This real love—this love of belief and response—is what transformed the disciples when they embraced the good news of Easter morning. They began the day behind locked doors, fearful for their lives, not believing the words they heard from the women. Then Jesus appeared among them, and they began to believe. As the church grew following the Holy Spirit’s presence at Pentecost, Christians were known not only by their incredible story of the Son of God killed then risen from the dead, they were also known by their love, by the way they responded to such good news with no fear of death and a renewed energy to love others.

They were known for the way they cared for one another, for Jew and Gentile, for outcast and widow, for foreigner and prison guard, for all whom they encountered. The disciples’ lives were transformed in response to Jesus’ love for them, and they began to love others in words and in actions.

Such transforming love continues today. Maxie Dunnam once ..heard a story about a relatively new Christian talking with an atheist. The atheist was questioning the new Christian about various historical matters related to Christianity. The new Christian could not answer most of the questions. The atheist commented, “You sure don’t know much about Christ. Are you sure that you want to commit your life to Christ?” The new Christian replied, “I’m embarrassed that I don’t know more answers to your questions but what I do know is that Jesus has delivered me from my drinking; He has saved and restored my marriage; my children have opened their hearts to me again; and I now face each day with sanity and serenity.”

-- Maxie Dunnam as told by Scott Brewer 8-07

“Becoming Loving and Sacrificial” sermoncentral.com

Pastor Guy Caley imagines:

.. Real love looks less like two beautiful Hollywood stars arm in arm on the beach and looks more like a room on the cancer ward where a loving husband reassures his bride ravaged by disease that she’s still the most beautiful girl in the world to him.
[Real] Love looks less like big donations made publicly to have a wing of the hospital named for the donor and more like an anonymous hero laboring by the sweat of her brow in the shadows.
[Real] Love looks less like gushing letters promising unending devotion and more like a spouse hurt, betrayed and confused, deciding to forgive and work things out.
[Real] Love is accepting others as less than perfect, but still choosing to think the best rather than assume the worst.
Real love is not some giddy feeling I get when I think about a special person, real love is a decision to place someone’s welfare above my own when I don’t feel particularly warm and fuzzy about them. -- Guy Caley sermoncentral.com 8-06 “Real Love”

Real love is not just something we do because we feel good doing it. Real love is a choice to follow Jesus and a choice to love one another in word and deed, in thought and action, on Sunday mornings and Friday nights.

.. “The most convincing invitation to believe in Christ comes through the transformed lives of his followers living in fellowship with one another.”

 --Upper Room Disciplines 2006, p.108

In what ways do others see Jesus through our fellowship, our lives, our faith, and our love?

While this is the final week of our series that calls us to be Christ-like neighbors to the world around us, our commission continues on. Love one another. Love those who sit across the aisle from you. Love the children who claim this place as their own during the week. Love our youth.

Love your next door neighbors. And the ones who live beside the church. Love all in our community. Continue to love in ever expanding circles out into the world.

Love one another. As God loves us. Love one another. In response to Jesus’ presence in our lives. Love one another.

This is our commission, and our mission, and our marching orders. We are not to be like the cartoon where everyone is standing inside the church, afraid to go out the doors, for above the church doors was the sign, “You are now entering the mission field.” We are called and empowered and commissioned to go forth and love God and love one another.

May we live it beyond this week and beyond this place, wherever we are for as long as we live.

May it be so. Let us pray.