

1 John 3: 16-24 “Damaging Charity” Rev. Janet Chapman 4/24/24

While browsing in a Christian bookstore, Gayle Urban came across a shelf of reduced-priced items. Among them was a figurine of a man and woman, their heads lovingly tilted towards one another. The inscription read Happy 10th Anniversary. It appeared to be in perfect condition, yet its tag said “Damaged.” Examining it more closely, another tag underneath said, “Wife is coming unglued.” Maybe some of us understand the relevance of such words? Love can get damaged in a variety of ways especially when it becomes more about the self than about others.

The essence of love has become the topic of so many preachers, scholars, and poets that the minute it is mentioned, our eyes glaze over and our minds travel to what’s for lunch, can those tomato plants finally get into the ground, and what happened to that other sock from that brand new pair? So let me assure you we aren’t going to get into the definition of love, because in the first letter of John’s, love is not something you define, it is something you do. Any descriptions of love are done so by pointing to actions rather than words, stories rather than definitions, universal truths rather than lies. First John builds on the Gospel of John, tying into such images as Jesus as the Good Shepherd, the one whose life and death will be for the benefit of the “sheep” who follow him. According to Greco-Roman literature, what Jesus does is die a “noble death” where the hero dies in an act of their own volition, embracing their own suffering for the benefit of others. First John is a letter that reads more like a sermon, without a recipient or a greeting, complete with instructions for the community reading it. The community has fallen away from the truths that got them started in the first place. The letter makes the connection between our love for each other and Christ’s love for 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.” The author tries to show how that plays out as we live our lives in the context of community. “How does God’s love abide in anyone who has the world’s goods and sees a brother or sister in need and refuses to help?” This verse becomes central to living out the gospel of love in action.

Many of us know that most Americans have more of the world’s goods compared to anywhere else. The disparity grows even wider as 93% of the nation’s wealth is owned by

only 6% of the population while the remaining 7% is divided among the rest of us. At the same time, racial and gender inequality remain as deep as ever. Nonprofit, parachurch, and activist organizations have revealed a keen vision for what active love looks like in the face of such needs. In 1967, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr gathered leaders from over 50 multiracial organizations in Atlanta to launch the Poor People's Campaign. In addition to planning a march on Washington, the campaign developed a platform and advanced an Economic Bill of Rights that included annual appropriation of funds to fight against poverty, congressional passage of employment and income legislation, and construction of low-cost housing units. Unfortunately, these efforts were cut short, due in part to the assassination of Dr. King. But in the last decade, a grassroots movement revived the Poor People's Campaign, under the leadership of our own Rev. Dr. William Barber, uniting tens of thousands of people across the country. They are challenging the evils of systemic racism, poverty, the war economy, ecological devastation, and the nation's distorted morality – all made worse by the previous global pandemic.

This is love at its most powerful state, as well as its most powerless. As Frederick Buechner notes, it is the most powerful because such love alone can conquer that final and most impregnable stronghold which is the human heart. It is the most powerless because it can do nothing except by consent. In the Christian realm, love is not primarily an emotion but an act of the will. When Jesus tells us to love our neighbors, he is not telling us to love them with some cozy emotion like warm fuzzies. Humans can emote a warm feeling about as easy as producing a yawn or a cough. On the contrary, Jesus is telling us to love our neighbors in the sense of being willing to work for their well-being, even if it means sacrificing our own well-being to that end. Most of us haven't been called to die for a cause. Yet that doesn't mean we aren't called to put aside our self-interests for the improvement of others. For some, that means dropping a check in the mail to some worthy non-profit, but it is far more than that. It is putting aside the temptation to fix others to fit our expectations – sometimes we can do for others and actually damage them in the process. Do you have a problem? Well, I'm the solution. That is just an inch away from saying "You are the problem." Sam Wells in his book, A Nazareth Manifesto, reminds us that God is inviting us to be with those in need, to

work side by side *with* them, not *for* them. The seeds of a community's redemption lies in the community itself. It isn't handing over the fish but teaching them how to fish, or better yet letting them teach us how to fish together. As one scholar put it, "The opposite of poverty isn't property, the opposite of both poverty and property is community." We have coffee with someone, not to save them, but to enjoy friendship. Only in this way are they ennobled and empowered, only in this way *are we* ennobled and empowered. First John seems to imply this is the proper way to care for and with those in need. And Mother Theresa takes it a step further by saying, anything we do for and with others, we ultimately do for and with Christ... literally.

From Mother Theresa, I invite you to take a momentous leap to football coach Vince Lombardi who was asked what it took to make a winning team. He said, "There are a lot of coaches with good ball clubs who know the fundamentals and have plenty of discipline but still don't win the game. Then you come to the 3rd ingredient: If you're going to play together as a team, you've got to care for each other deeply. You've got to love each other. Each player has to be thinking about the next player and saying to themselves, 'If I don't block that guy, Paul is going to get his legs broken. I have to do my job well in order that he can do his.' The difference between mediocrity and greatness is the feeling these players have for each other." In a healthy community, whether it be the church, the city or the nation, each must learn to care for the other, taking seriously Jesus' command to love one another, in order to become a winning team.

From football, I invite you to leap again to a Sunday School ministry in the part of New York City rated to be the "most likely place to get killed." A Puerto Rican woman who spoke very little English came to Pastor Bill Wilson wanting to do something for God. The pastor initially responded, "I don't know what you can do." "Por favor, let me do something," she responded. "Ok, how about you ride one of our several busses that picks kids up for Sunday School? Ride a different bus each week and just love the kids." So every week, she rode a different bus and loved on the children. She would find the worst-looking or most withdrawn kid on the bus, put him or her on her lap, and whisper over and over the only words she learned in English: "I love you. Jesus loves you." After several months, she became attached

to one little boy in particular. She told the pastor, "I don't want to change busses anymore. I want to stay with this one bus." The boy didn't speak but came every week to Sunday School with his sister and sat on the woman's lap. Each week, she would tell him all the way to church and all the way home, "I love you and Jesus loves you." One day, to her amazement, the little boy turned around and stammered, "I – I I-I-love you, t-t-too." Then he put his arms around her and gave her a big hug. That was at 2:30 in the afternoon. By 6:30 that night, the boy was found dead in a garbage bag under a fire escape. His mother had beaten him to death and thrown his body in the trash. Some of the last and certainly most important words that boy ever heard in his life were "I love you and Jesus loves you!"

One more leap, dear friends, into an ICU waiting room... any ICU waiting room. Urgent questions surface in such a place filled with anguished people. Will my husband make it? Will my child walk again? How will I survive without my companion of 55 years? The ICU waiting room is different from any other place in the world. And the people who wait are different. They can't do enough for each other. No one is rude. The distinctions of race, class, sexual orientation, gender melt away. A person is a father first, a black man second. The garbage man loves his spouse as much as the university professor loves hers, and everyone understands this. Each person is pulling for everyone else. In the ICU waiting room, the world becomes God's realm. Vanity and pretense vanish, personal agendas amongst the waiters seem to diminish as people treat one another with respect, recognizing that everyone is struggling in those moments. The universe is focused on the well-being of others, everyone knows that loving someone else is what life is all about. What if such a perspective could seep into every interaction we have and become a waiting room encounter? What if words like "I love you and Jesus loves you" were more than just words but a way of living? What if charity was more than a mail-in donation, fostered by our own expectations? How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and refuses to help? The answers lie not just in our hearts that are so easily distracted, but in our actions. Thanks be to God.