



WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Westminster Presbyterian Church
Knoxville, TN
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The Rev. Dr. Richard Coble
Sermon: “Generation to Generation”

1 John 3:16-24 (NRSV)

3:16 We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us--and we ought to lay down our lives for one another.

3:17 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?

3:18 Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.

3:19 And by this we will know that we are from the truth and will reassure our hearts before him

3:20 whenever our hearts condemn us; for God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything.

3:21 Beloved, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have boldness before God;

3:22 and we receive from him whatever we ask, because we obey his commandments and do what pleases him.

3:23 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.

3:24 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.

“Generation to Generation”

There is a version of Christian piety that emphasizes the physical pain of Jesus on the cross. Perhaps you have been exposed to this phenomenon. If you’ve ever seen Mel Gibson’s *The Passion of the Cross* you’ve witnessed a vivid, R-rated version of it.

I'll never forget the dynamic speaker at a Baptist summer camp who once spent the entirety of his sermon talking about the physical tortures of crucifixion. I was a teenager when I heard it. I can still recall his descriptions of the nails and asphyxiation two and a half decades later.

Cole Arthur Riley, author of *Black Liturgies* and the book *This Here Flesh*, which I spoke of in a sermon a couple weeks ago, writes about a similar experience in middle school:

*It was a Good Friday service, she writes, and the pastor, a small man with hair slick like oil and veins that stained his flesh blue, was pacing the stage. He began gesticulating wildly... 'And they DROVE the nails right here,' he said, digging his thumb and pointer fingers into his wrist. 'And they took the nest of thorns and RAMMED it on his scalp.' And he hammered his own skull with his fist. 'This is what JESUS gave for you,' the blue man cries... 'he gave his BLOOD. What will you give? Is he worthy of your LIFE? Will you give your life to him today?'*¹

Cole Arthur Riley continues:

As a finale, they made us write down our deepest loves and throw them into a fire in the parking lot. 'Jesus wants it all. Will you give your life for him?' ...In hindsight, this was my first encounter with a spirituality that demanded my death far more...than it ever advocated for my life.

A spirituality that demanded my death.

Have you ever come across a spirituality demand your death?

Have you ever been in a community that said you had to die to yourself in order to live for Christ?

At the heart of that message is a subtext that there is something inherently wrong with who you are. That *you* are wrong or bad, and you've got to become someone different, if you expect God to love you. It's a spirituality of submission.

Has a church service ever made you feel like you had to change in order for God to love you?

¹ Arthur Cole Riley, *This Here Flesh: Spirituality, Liberation, and the Stories that Make Us* (New York: Convergent Books, 2022), quotes from p. 58-59.

This is different than, but it's also echoed by, messages that we receive outside of church walls, where many of our relationships are based on transactions, and you've got to earn your place. We sell our time, our labor, our expertise in order to survive and thrive in this world.

There are messages there too, like,

- Your value is based on your output, or where you come from, or who you know.
- Your value is based on what you can buy.
- And you're not going to be safe, you're not going to be secure, unless you produce: in the office, at school, in the social circles where you find yourself.

In both cases, the church and outside the church, you've got to earn your place. And there's always the possibility, you won't measure up. And it can be exhausting.

In our passage today, 1 John invites us to a different way of understanding our value.

It starts out with a familiar message:

We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us – and we ought to lay down our lives for one another.

But notice what laying down your life means to 1 John:

How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister I need and yet refuses help?

This is not an invitation to death or shame, like the one Cole Arthur Riley heard in middle school. And it's not a relationship based on production or transaction. In fact, it's the opposite of that, it's an invitation to an economy of love. Simply giving because you can. Laying down one's life is measured in acts of equity and justice and care.

And when we do that, we find not death but life:

By this we will know that we are from the truth and will reassure our hearts before [God] whenever our hearts condemn us; for God is greater than our hearts, and [God] knows everything.

- When the world tells us that we are only so good by how measure up,
- or when a church tells you you're not good at all and you need to turn or burn,
- And even when we take those lessons to heart, and our own hearts betray us, 1 John invites us instead to put our trust in a God who is greater than our hearts.

In short, we are invited, to love others and to trust God.

To know God is to trust in God, even when you feel unlovable or unworthy or worthless: *We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us.*

And the love that God pours into us even when we don't feel ready to receive it – It doesn't just stay there. It overflows, in acts of love to those around us.

Let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.

In 1 John, we are called into a different way of being in this world, where the Spirit of God claims us, loves us, give us inherent value, and points us, not inward but outward, to a hurting world, in acts of love and justice.

1 John's name for this is 'abiding.'

ch. 4: *Those who abide in love abide in God and God abides in them.*

I've been thinking this week about how, as a parent, you do your best to communicate these things to your kids. And sometimes you get it right and other-times you fail at it.

Our 3 (soon to be 4) year old is at a stage in her life where she talks without filter almost nonstop throughout the day.

It's beautiful; it's charming; it's exhausting.

Friday morning, she randomly started singing Taylor Swift's song "Karma."² Yes, her father may have been the one to expose her to this song. Perhaps you know it.

² Many thanks to WPC member Katherine Sands, who pointed out to me that the following lyrics are actually from Taylor Swift's song, "Anti-Hero," not "Karma." Clearly a I'm a failed Swiftie.

It's the one that goes, 'It's Me, Hi, I'm the problem it's me.' Those lyrics take on a whole meaning, when it's your 3-year-old daughter, who suddenly as you're putting on her shoes in the morning, starts sing out of the blue, "It's me, hi, I'm the problem it's me."

And as much as I want to agree with her, because frankly she is the reason we are late getting out the door on a school day, I also know, that doesn't need to be a core message she hears at this impressionable age. I need to tell her she's not a problem.

She especially needs to know that, because, I know, she's going to grow up in a world where some people and places are going to treat her as less than because of her gender, and make her feel like she's a problem, simply because of who she is. And I want her to know, at the outset, that those people are wrong. You do your best to communicate these things to your kids. Sometimes you fail at it.

Luckily, that's not the only random message she repeats. Another afternoon this week, out of nowhere she told me she 'wanted to go and be with Jesus.' And I said, 'well some day we will be with Jesus,' thinking the conversation would end there. But then she said, 'I want to be with Jesus now. And I want you to be with him, and mom, and brother.' And suddenly a cute moment turned endearingly morbid very quickly.

Thank you, Westminster Sunday school teachers. If you've ever wondered, yes, they are listening closely.

How do we make sure our children hear more of that; that they are loved, unconditionally, by a God who came close to us, who draws near to us? How do we ensure the children of our community hear that more than other religious messages of shame and condemnation?

Perhaps we can't.

Parents cannot shield their children from the world's cruelty or our failures, writes Esau McCauley this week in the *New York Times*.³

³ Esau McCauley, "One Thing Parents Can Control." *The New York Times*. April 16, 2024. <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/04/16/opinion/parenting-mistakes-joy.html>

Dr. McCauley is a professor of New Testament and public theology at Wheaton College. His piece this week is about parents doing their best to bring joy into their children's lives, knowing full well this world will also try to take that joy away.

He writes:

I have never understood people who complain about poor families buying a nice TV or shoes or taking their children out to eat. Is it all to be drudgery? Are struggling families not allowed to have dessert?

He writes:

I remember my mother buying us candy at the gas station, having decided that since we were already broke, we might as well take the happiness when we could get it.

Dr. McCauley writes about his own son, who is 9 years old. He talks about his own failures with his son. Times when his temper was too short. Times when he said things he wished he could take back. He also talks about moments of shared joy, like taking his son to a professional soccer game in England and seeing the delight on his face.

It is hard to predict the impact of these experiences, he says. Parents can only [try to] make deposits of joy [in their children's lives]... [It] is always an exercise in hope, a gift given to a future we cannot see to the end.

Parenting as an exercise in hope, in the face of the world's cruelty and even our own failures.

I think the same can be said about church, by the way:

This is an exercise in hope, in the face of the world's cruelty and even our own failures.

The church is not perfect. Some of us grew up with bad theology that taught shame instead of grace, death instead of life. Remember that story at the beginning by Cole Arthur Riley.

But look at us: people keep coming together as the body of Christ. We keep coming to this place, trying to do something different. The Spirit of God keeps bringing us here, trying to show us something different.

The font is a good example. It's an exercise in hope, too.

- Hope that our children – and not just your or my children but every single child who sets foot in this place - will know that they are loved and surrounded by a grace that they did not have to earn and that will not leave their side.
- Hope that they will know it's a grace they can trust, even more than when this world or their own hearts tell them that they are less than.

We pray they will remember, when they grow up, that by grace they don't have to weigh their value on their accomplishments, their titles, their bank account, their transactions, their consumption.

We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us.

That message, it starts at the font, but it doesn't end there. That grace extends on out, to you too. It is the foundation of everything we say and everything we do in the name of Christ, here as the body of Christ. It is grace that surrounds you.

In our Scripture today, we are asked trust in that grace; to teach it to our children; to remind each other. Every time we come to this place, we remind each other, as 1 John puts it, to trust and to love. Every time we leave this place, we take that message with us.

It's a message:

- That God is bigger than our hearts
- That God desires our life, not our death
- Because God's love flows through you,
- In fact, it overflows, so that we point it outward.
- Working so others too, will know, that they are loved and loveable.
 - In this world that tells so many people they aren't worthwhile; in word and in deed, we work to ensure everyone knows, they are worthwhile.

In short, We trust and we love. Remember to trust, and to love.
For we abide in God. And God abides in us. Amen.