

This is the message you heard from the beginning: We should love one another. ¹² *Do not be like Cain, who belonged to the evil one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his own actions were evil and his brother's were righteous.* ¹³ *Do not be surprised, my brothers, if the world hates you.* ¹⁴ *We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love our brothers. Anyone who does not love remains in death.* ¹⁵ *Anyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life in him.* ¹⁶ *This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers.* ¹⁷ *If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him?* ¹⁸ *Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth. (1 John 3:11-18)*

Love One Another

What is your church supposed to be like? If we were going to describe the ideal congregation, I think one point that most of us would include is that it would be a warm and friendly place – a place where we felt like people cared about us and supported us when life was hard. Is Peace that kind of place for you? You may be aware that Lutheran congregations don't have a great reputation in that regard. Some people like to call us "the frozen chosen" because they don't feel that we do a good job of loving one another. Do you agree with them when it comes to Peace? That's probably going to depend on your experience here. If you feel close to the people here, then you probably are going to argue that this is a very loving church. On the other hand, if you feel marginalized and unappreciated, if you feel that people here haven't listened to you and in fact have talked down to you or talked behind your back, you might feel like Peace has a lot of work to do in this area. Whatever your personal experience has been, this morning God gives this command to every Christian in every congregation: **love one another!**

I.

Christian congregations are unique places. They're not clubs or social organizations. They are the gathering of the people of God. **Love one another – love separates us from the world.** John says, **"This is the message you heard from the beginning: We should love one another."** When John says that we heard this message from the beginning, he's thinking of the beginning of the New Testament Church. On the night before he died, Jesus said, **"A new command I give you: Love one another."** The apostles carried that command with them everywhere that they carried the good news about Jesus. That means that it came all the way here. For us at Peace, love isn't optional. Love isn't something we do if we have the time and the energy. And we can't make excuses for failure to love. Every loveless act and word is sin. When we love ourselves first and the people who sit around us here second or third or fifth, we've broken the basic command of our lives together as Christians.

God's plan is for our churches to be special places. Now, I don't mean the building, although I hope we feel that "specialness" when we're here. I'm talking about the people. This group of people right here is supposed to be your refuge from the world. Your relationship with the people here is supposed to be different than it is with the people out there. John tells us not to be like Cain who murdered his brother. Cain and Abel were the children of Adam and Eve. They each brought an offering to God. But Cain's offering did not come from a heart of faith, so God rejected it while he accepted Abel's. So what did Cain do? He hated his brother because unbelievers always hate the good works of the people of God. And he murdered him.

The lesson that John draws from this is simple: **"Do not be surprised, my brothers, if the world hates you."** The world is always going to hate us, if we live as God calls us to. They're never going to respect our teachings. They're never going to appreciate our worship services. The natural response of an unbelieving heart is to hate God, and therefore, to hate the people who follow him.

How much time do we spend trying to get people outside the church to like us? How much more important to us is their opinion than the opinion of people within the church? How often don't we keep our beliefs to ourselves because we don't want people at work, people in the neighborhood, even people in our families to have a bad opinion of us? Now it's not wrong to have friends outside the church. But God wants us to have special relationship with the people here. In fact, John says, **"We know that we have passed from**

death to life, because we love our brothers. Anyone who does not love remains in death.” If you have faith, you will love your brothers and sisters in the faith. If you have no love, you have no faith.

Love is the natural result of faith in Christ. That love wipes out hatred. John says, **“Anyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life in him.”** To God the desire to hurt or kill someone is exactly the same as doing it, even if I never act on that desire. But the natural result of faith is to drive hatred out of our hearts. Love conquers hate. Love repents of those desires and turns to Jesus for forgiveness. The place where we learn to love is here. It’s among these people. Our church is supposed to be our new family under God. This congregation is supposed to be the people who stand with us and who love us no matter what else happens to us in this life.

Is Peace that kind of place for you? I hope so. And I know that for some people it is. But I also know some people would tell me no, this congregation is not like that for them at all. If you’re one of those people, then there is a profound question that must be asked: why isn’t Peace like that for you? It’s easy to point the finger at other people and say, “They haven’t treated me with much love!” That may be true. If it is, we have much to repent of. But there is another side of it – and I say that as a person who has often struggled to feel loved in Christian communities. The other side is this: what have you done to encourage love? What kind of love have you shown? You see, love is always about other people. It’s always about what they need, not what I want. And our natural tendency is to point out how little people love us and how hurt we are and demand that others treat us better. But if it’s all about us, then what love are we showing to those around us?

Now, by saying that, I don’t mean to let our congregation off the hook. Do we love each other in this church? No one can answer that question because Peace Lutheran Church is not a person. It’s a collection of more than 500 people, some of whom do a wonderful job of loving the people around them while others don’t do such a good job. Whether you feel loved or not here probably depends on who from our church you’re hanging out with, if anybody. But every member of this congregation is a sinner – even those who try to do a good job in this area. Can any of us argue that he or she is perfect in loving? Can any of us really say that whatever problems our congregation has in love are all someone else’s fault?

I hope we know better. Love is a lifelong lesson. Some of us are on the advanced course. Some of us are still at the beginning. But all of us are still learning what it means to love one another in Christ every day. Wherever we are in the course, our failure to love others, our insistence on loving ourselves first is sin, pure and simple. In the end, all sin comes down to loving ourselves instead of loving God and the people around us. Every person in hell is there because he did not love as God calls us to. If our love is not perfect, then we deserve to join those people in hell.

But God loves us too much to let that happen. So he sent his only Son to die and free us from hell. The Son of God, the Ruler of the Universe, the one who has every right to demand love from us and to punish us when we fail to love, he came down here to live in this world and to feel life without love in our place. Jesus knew what it was like to be hated by the world. His enemies never left him alone. They lied and schemed and manipulated the Roman justice system and murdered him.

But Jesus didn’t go to the cross because of those enemies, however hard they worked to make that happen. He could’ve stopped the process any time he wanted to. Jesus went to the cross because he loved us. He died because we don’t love God enough to obey him. He died for every one of our failures to love the people around us, even the people in our own congregation and in our own family. He died because we naturally love only ourselves. While he was dying, he suffered hell itself – enough hell to pay for the hatred and self-love of every human being on earth. He paid for you and for me. Three days after he died, he rose. His love was that powerful. He rose and he set us free from the penalty for our hatred and self-love. He rose and declared that we will live with him forever. That resurrection is the source of all the love that God commands us to have for one another. It is the power that enables us to love.

II.

So even though we have a command to love, and God does expect us to strive to obey that command, all power to love comes from him. All desire to love radiates from the cross. My friends, **love one another – love imitates Christ’s love for us.**

Love is not really a feeling here. John says, **“This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers.”** I don’t believe Jesus had a warm, fuzzy feeling about having nails driven through his hands and feet and then enduring hell itself for us.

For Jesus love was much more than just an emotion. There was emotion. When Lazarus died and his sisters were heartbroken, Jesus wept because he felt how much that hurt them and he loved them. Jesus does feel love for us.

But when John says, **“This is how we know what love is,”** he doesn’t point to any of those feelings. He points to what Jesus did: he laid down his life for us. And then he commands us to love by laying down our lives for others. You see, God knows that we sinners are not really in control of our feelings. We can put a lid on them. We can talk them out and deal with them. We can even strive to slowly change them. But we can’t make ourselves feel warm fuzzies for people who don’t deserve it. Jesus doesn’t command us to.

What he commands is to love by how we live. He commands us to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters in Christ, whether they deserve it or not. So loving our congregation does not mean that we are nice to those people who are nice to us and we ignore the rest. It doesn’t mean that if you can’t say anything nice, don’t say anything at all. It doesn’t mean avoiding people that you don’t get along with. Love means sacrificing for the good of the people around you, even if they have hurt you in the past, even if they don’t realize how little you feel loved by them.

The example John uses illustrates that. He says, **“If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him?”** The Greek translated here as “has no pity” literally means, “shuts his heart against him.” If we see the needs of our fellow Christians – and indeed of people in general – and we close our hearts against them – we figure it’s not my problem or my responsibility – we are not loving them. If we don’t love others, how can God’s love live in us? Faith in Christ always brings forth real love.

But that love is lived. It is genuine because it changes how we act. If a father tells his children he loves them, and he means it. He has deep feelings for them, but then he works so much that they never see him or he drinks so much that those kids go hungry, has he really loved them? No. Love is more than just saying the right things at the right time. Love is changing our actions so that we make real sacrifices for the good of the people around us. This congregation is supposed to be a place where we check our egos at the door and actively look for ways to help one another.

The only way that will ever happen is if this congregation is all about Christ. No one ever gave more for us than he did. Every one of us here today is here because Jesus died for our lovelessness. Every one of us is here today because the Holy Spirit in love found us. He brought us to baptism; he brought us to the good news about Jesus. He filled our hearts with the love that comes from God. Every day as we hear more about that love in Christ, he makes God’s love in us grow. That love changes us. It gives us the power to love. It gives us the desire to love. My friends, you have that power. You have that desire. Now live it. Love one another. Amen.