

John 10:11-18
1 John 3:14-24

A Fellowship of Love

Acts of great hatred and acts of great love, you have likely seen both. Ask someone who has lived in a war zone and they could tell you stories of both. Even as someone watching the news of the wars anywhere in the world of the last few years, be it Afghanistan, Ukraine, or now Gaza, one is aware of the hatred and the dehumanization of war, as well as being witness to stories of great sacrifice for another.

Anyone who has taken a social studies class in Canada is aware of the atrocities of the Second World War at concentration camps. These camps were the ultimate stories of hatred. The things that happened there unfathomable to most of us. Some people have stories that tell of living under occupation. My own grandparents, who were from the Netherlands, each did what I believe to be acts of great love and compassion. My paternal grandfather, a farmer, used the canal system to bring food into Amsterdam under the cover of night. He did not act alone, and as I reflect, I can't even imagine what strain and stress that may have caused my Oma as she waited back home, knowing that should anything happen, she might be raising eight children on her own.

My grandfather and grandmother on my mom's side, also from the Netherlands were part of a system of homes that moved Jews from one place to another. There were never caught, however they were under suspicion. Again, a big family, as was the norm back then, they put their home, family, and their very lives at risk. But they were not alone in these acts of compassion. These are examples that come from a time of living during war, stories of great peril, great risk, and sacrifice.

Yet one does not need to be in a war zone to see both the hate and the love that is in the world. Crime rates show that there is no end to the hate. Black Lives Matter came out of the horrific and tragic stories of black men and women being killed by people who called themselves police, were police, who were racist. People who didn't see the person, only the colour of their skin.

Human sex trafficking is a booming business, one in which girls, boys, and women, are seen as objects to be exploited for personal gain and wealth. Even the drug trade doesn't see the people it affects, or the lives that are lost due to overdose and the crushing grief of families left to pick up the pieces. The purpose for those involved is to make money. Who cares what the casualties are.

And when we think we may be off the hook as we are not a part of such heinous activities, we only need to think about what goes through our minds when we see

someone on the down and out, dirty and disheveled, someone whose home is on the streets or in one of the encampments that become larger by the year in this city. People who do not have a toilet to use or clean water to wash with. It is easy to judge others based on their appearance for whatever reason. Checking our hearts and minds is imperative.

What we heard today from 1 John “¹⁴We know that we have passed from death to life because we love one another. Whoever does not love abides in death. ¹⁵All who hate a brother or sister are murderers, and you know that murderers do not have eternal life abiding in them. 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?”

All who hate are murderers. It doesn’t say you have to have committed a murder; it just says all who hate are murderers. Those are strong words. And if you have never hated, I am grateful for you. I know I have hated. I hated one man in particular who thought I could be frisked for his pleasure. Often pinning me to a wall at my place of work when I was fifteen years of age. I have no idea what gave him the idea that this was okay. It wasn’t the first time in my life time of boys and men doing this to me. Somehow that kind of experience was part of my lived experience and hate is easy. Even as I write this I have to work at those feelings of hate.

Thankfully God knows how difficult working through these things can be as the writer of John also says, “¹⁸Little 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.”

God knows how difficult it can be to love in truth and action. To lay down our lives for another. Laying down our lives does not mean that we have to die, though some have. Rather it is giving of ourselves in ways that cost our something for the life-giving benefit of another.

There is no expectation that we will be perfect or do this perfectly. How can we be perfect, we are human, but we are to strive to love. For me it means letting go of my hatred, not so much for the person as much as it is so I can love myself. Though releasing that person releases me from the burden I carry. Knowing that the people who molested me are also children of God, if even very broken, helps me to see their brokenness and give them over to God.

It doesn’t mean that I ever let anyone trample over me again. It also means that I am acutely sensitive to people who have had these experiences. Paying attention to my own healing has made a difference in how I see others who struggle for many reasons.

Thing is, we are not called to judge or to hate, we are called to love and compassion because the Lord our God is loving and compassionate. If we are to call ourselves

Christian community, followers of God, a fellowship of love, we have to get past our judgements and our hate. Christian community is marked by love. Again, we will not do it perfectly, but to strive for love for all is imperative.

How do we show love? It is in our words, but it is even more evident in our actions toward each other in this church and then how that spills over into our community and the world. This way of loving, of love spilling over, is what is represented in the relationship between God the Creator, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. This relationship is so overflowing that it creates out of love. Our world, each of us, is created out of this overflowing loving relationship of God.

Our actions of love are shown when we hold people in prayer on the prayer chain, when people take time out of their lives to knit a prayer shawl so that we can share our love for others in the gift of a prayer shawl to comfort them. We show our love in action when we collect food to support the food bank, or gather socks, underwear, and gifts for those who do not have the means to purchase those things. Sheila, on our behalf, shows great compassion each day as she speaks to those on our steps and cleans up after them, she is the face of our love in action. It happens when a meal is shared at Lunch with a Difference or at a coffee hour.

But do not think for a moment that we should be satisfied with those deeds. For starters, none of those things takes much from us in terms of our being face to face with the need and struggle of others. Much of this allows us to be arms length from the day-to-day realities of what people are facing.

Even when we think of those who are grieving, those who are fighting illness whether physical or mental, those who are living in long term care homes, or the needs of some many others who are a part of this congregation, where are we?

Are we making sure that members of our congregation are not sitting alone in their homes? Are we caring for the need in front of us? When one hears of someone who has gone through an operation and is recovering at home, or those who are at their limit emotionally for any number of reasons, are we present for them?

As individuals there are some who are very good at being present for others, but as a congregation we have more work to do to live into our mission statement that starts with the three words of responding, restoring, and rejoicing.

Now I do not share this to make you feel bad, but rather as a call to pay attention to those around you here at church and those around you where you reside. Pay attention to those who you meet on the street, or those who give you your food at the drive through window. Those who put your groceries through the register at the store, and those who we usually don't see. Open your eyes, help us to be the congregation we are called to be, to be the fellowship of love that is Christian community.

I know you are loving people. I experience it everyday, but let us not be complacent in our love, "let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and actions." For this is the

commandment that we find in verse 23, that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us.” For “all who obey his commandments abide in him, and he abides in them.”

I don't know if the pronouns in that sentence refer to Jesus or to God, but it does not matter as both are love. If we love Jesus, if we love God, we are compelled to love others. It is part of our DNA. We are each created because of love. Things go a rye, we experience all kinds of harm that also taint how we see the world, but because God is love, we can learn to get past our pain to see others as loved by God.

The world God created was one of love. If all was love then we would no longer have to concern ourselves with war, with harm, with homelessness, and food insecurity. But that is not the world we live in. We are people called to bring life, to share the true and transforming story of God who loves. We do this not only in our words, but maybe even more so through our action.

As you go into your day and into your week, remember you and every person you meet was created out of the love of God which overflows from the loving relationship of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Seek to share that love with others each and everyday. And may we, in the days and weeks ahead become more and more a fellowship of love that spills love into the pews, that flows down the steps outside this sanctuary, and overflows into community. Amen.