

Text: 1 John 3:11-18

Theme: In Love We Give to God

Date: May 21, 2006 (Easter 6)

Dear brothers in sisters in Christ,

Being from Minnesota, I heard a little story the other day about Ole and Lena. Ole and Lena lived on a farm in Minnesota. Lena was starved for affection. Ole never gave her any signs of love, and Lena's need to be appreciated went unfulfilled. Finally, at her wit's end, Lena blurted out, "*Ole, why don't you ever tell me that you love me?*" Ole stoically answered, "*Lena, when I married you, I told you that I love you, and if that ever changes, you'll be the first to know.*"

How many of us are like Ole in our relationship to God? We do love God in our heart but sometimes we are reluctant to show it with our lips and in our lives. When it comes to special occasions in life, birthdays, anniversaries, the florists, the greeting card and candy companies have impressed on us that it's a good thing to tell that someone special in our life how much we love him or her. As human beings we all like to know that we are needed and loved. So it's also important for us to be the ones who are saying it and showing it, with both our words and our actions.

Time and time again we hear of God's great love for us Christ Jesus. In this Easter season we still recall the joy of the sunrise message of the angels, "*He is not here; He is risen.*" The resurrection of Jesus from the grave is the proof of purchase we need to have to know that our sin, our guilt and our punishment have all been removed forever before God. In the resurrected Christ we have peace with God. Today we want to focus on our response to God's love; our way of saying, "*Thank you for heaven.*" On the basis of God's Word, our sermon theme today is **IN LOVE WE GIVE TO GOD**. First, we will see that our response is patterned after the love of Christ. Secondly, that ours is different from the world's attitude. And finally, that it is evidenced in our actions.

1. Our love patterned after Christ's love

When it comes to showing love for God and others we sometimes are very stingy with our love. Maybe it's because we're too busy to love, too preoccupied, or too self-centered to love. Whatever reason we want to use for the "*Why*" we don't love better, the bottom line is because of sin. God gave us his First Commandment to show us how to love. "*You shall have no other gods*" Luther asked, "*What does this mean?*" In answer to the question God teaches us that we are to fear, love and trust in him above all things. God's command is for us to love him above everything else, to love him with all our heart, soul and strength. We simply don't do that, do we? In confirmation class, when we study the first commandment, I ask the children to come up with a list of things that people might treasure more highly than God, (and the kids get it) - money, spouse, family, human reason and strength, fame, popularity and leisure time. The list goes on and on. We all have that sinful heart that doesn't want God telling us what we are supposed to do and not supposed to do.

God's Word not only teaches us how to love him above all things, but it also helps us know how to love our neighbor. God says that we are to love your neighbor as much as we love yourself. Whatever we would do for yourself, God says, do it for your neighbor, and whatever we wouldn't do to ourselves, God says, don't do to your neighbor. But when it comes to loving our neighbor as much as we love ourselves, there again we find ourselves not only stingy with our love but sometimes down right hurtful with our words and actions. Our bitter, spiteful, lying words, our selfish, deceitful, immoral actions, they all go to show that we have not loved our neighbor as much as we have loved ourselves. And even our thoughts are condemned here, as John tells us that even hating our brother is equal to murder in God's sight. **Our sinfulness, in thoughts, words and actions, they all doom us to hell and rightfully so. It's an open and shut case. If we were left to ourselves we would never know how to love, nor would we have the proper motivation to love God or our neighbor.**

But the Word of God before us today changes all that. God tells us: **THIS IS HOW WE KNOW WHAT LOVE IS: JESUS CHRIST LAID DOWN HIS LIFE FOR US.** God in his love planned and carried out our salvation. He didn't want his special creation to end up in hell. That's why he sent his one and only Son, Jesus, into the world. By his perfect and sinless life, Jesus earned the holiness we need to enter heaven. Then he carried our sins, our loveless deeds, words and thoughts to the cross. There he paid the penalty that should have been ours. In love our Savior laid down his life so that the doors of heaven could be opened wide. Now, that's love! Therein lies our motivation and our power to love. Our love is to be patterned after the love of Christ. It's a perfect pattern of love. It's a powerful pattern of love.

All that Jesus did, all that he earned for the world, becomes yours and mine as the Holy Spirit works faith in our hearts. Through Word and sacrament, we are moved to put our trust and confidence in Jesus' love for sinner. God has made us part of his family, the family of believers. We have a place in our Father's mansions. Our eternal future is secure. That's what he has done out of love for us.

2. Our love is different from the attitude of the world

That's what will move us to love him - gratitude. We can never thank God enough that in Jesus we have a Savior. Our whole attitude will be changed. In love we begin to give to God.

That's different from the way the world thinks and acts. The people of this world, because of the selfish nature they can't control, will love mainly for selfish reasons. I'll be nice to you so that you are nice to me, that kind of attitude. People around us in the world may do the very same acts of love and charity as Christians, maybe they even do them better than we can. But if they are not done from a heart of faith in Jesus, not done out of love and gratitude toward God, they are meaningless in God's eyes.

That's why John uses the example of Cain and Abel in our text. Cain's offering to the Lord was undoubtedly a very nice one, the products of the soil. But his heart was not in it. There was no love for God in his actions. That's why the Lord was displeased with it. That's when Satan entered Cain's heart, when he became jealous over the fact that God was pleased with Abel's offering and not with his. That jealousy then erupted into murder. Because Cain did not love God, he had no love for his brother.

That's the reason the world will never understand the loving and giving heart of a Christian. Our actions are so different because our motives are so different. To the person who doesn't know God's love, our response of love and gratitude will appear to be such a waste. Why spend hundreds of thousands of dollars on Lutheran schools? Why give all that money to send missionaries throughout the world with the gospel message? Why build and maintain a worship facility like this one? Why come here week in and week out? Why give your time in volunteer service to the Lord? The world says, "What a waste!"

Sometimes we're tempted to listen to the unbelieving heart of the world. The world may contribute to many wonderful charities and spend countless hours working on some humanitarian project. But why are they doing it? It's a question we need to always ask ourselves. When we love are we doing it out of guilt? When we give our offerings are doing it to try and buy God's favor, to 'make up' for the bad things we have done in life? When we give our time are we trying to soothe a stinging conscience, or to make ourselves look good in the eyes of others? When we volunteer are we looking to win the praise and favor of our neighbor? The world acts in these ways because they don't know the love of God. They don't understand or comprehend what grace and forgiveness are all about. But God's people are different. I am different and you are different because **THIS IS HOW WE KNOW WHAT LOVE IS: JESUS CHRIST LAID DOWN HIS LIFE FOR US.**

3. Our love is evident in our actions

So love is the key to our actions. We love, because he first loved us. That's what the Bible says. We love because in love God took us into his family. We love because in love God has showered us with blessings too numerous to count, blessings for this life and for the life to come.

So how do we show our love? In the words of our text we read, **DEAR CHILDREN, LET US NOT LOVE WITH WORDS OR TONGUE, BUT WITH ACTIONS AND IN TRUTH.** Actions speak louder than words. A picture is worth a 1000 words. Oh, our words are important as a display of our love for God. We are here today to show by our words of praise, our hymns of trust, our prayers of intercession and thanks, that God is the one who deserves all the glory. It is with our words that we confess that Jesus Christ is our Lord and Savior. It is with our tongues that we spread the good news that he is the Savior of all mankind. It is with our words that we teach the gospel to our children. So using our tongues is an important part of displaying our love for God.

But our actions prove what our words say. In love we will give of our time, our energy, our abilities. Giving the Lord time with his Word in worship each week, each day in Bible reading is an act of love. Serving on a church committee, being part of a service organization, teaching VBS or Sunday School, singing in the choir, joining in with the fellowship activities - those are all places in which our actions are showing our love for the Lord.

But it's not just at church that we demonstrate our love. In our homes and places of business, at school or when we're attending sporting events or concerts, in whatever situation God places us, that's a time for us to live for him; Whether we eat or drink or whatever we do, we do it all for the glory of God.

And that carries over into the way we use the gifts God has given to us; our possessions, our property, our prosperity. Remember, everything that we have in life belongs to God. He is just lending it to us during our time here on earth. But it's all his. We are just managers or stewards. So we have to answer to God as to how we use it. Out of love for him we will want to use our money and possessions in ways that show love for him. But our sinful nature sometimes tempts us to be stingy with our love for God. Sometimes we're tempted to think, "*You know God, I have a lot of bills; tuition, mortgage, car payment, utilities, rising fuel costs. I have to take care of my family. I have to pay my financial obligations.*"

When were tempted to be stingy with our love for God, we need to remember that God was never stingy with his love for us. He gave his Son, his only Son, to live for us, to die for us and to live again so that we might be empowered to love him above all things. Only as we respond in love, only as we look at the blessings we have in Jesus, the fact that we are family under God through faith in him, only then will we get a handle on things. It's really not a money problem. It's a love problem. In the story I started with today, Lena complained because she couldn't tell whether Ole loved her, at least not by his words, and probably not too much by his actions. Do we show that Jesus is the love of our lives? Look at all that he has done for us! Let there be no doubt based on our words or our actions that in love, out of the deepest gratitude, we are giving our best, we are giving generously and cheerfully of all that we are and all that we have. God help us to be his loving, thankful children. AMEN.

