

April 22, 2018

I John 3: 16-24

Dear God, Please be with us today as we seek to uncover truths in your Word. We ask for illumination of these ancient texts and wisdom in applying them to our lives. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

No Greater Love

I don't know if you've ever lived near a culvert that allows a creek to run under a road. They can work fine in droughts or even in moderate rainfall.

But when huge rains come, they often cannot handle the torrent of water that the creek becomes. The water can't get through, and it backs up.

That happened to my family when I was 8 years old. Heavy rains came and flooded the creeks on two sides of our house. Then a lake upstream released its flood gates.

The culvert under Shannon Drive couldn't handle all the water, and our house flooded. We had to escape in the middle of the night and were out for months.

The county took out that culvert and built a bridge on Shannon Drive, so that would supposedly never happen again. But of course, there were other culverts all over the county that were similarly threatened as more construction caused more runoff.

Hammett Road out in the suburbs between Taylors and Greer had such a culvert. Hammett Road is a cut-through between Old Spartanburg and Brushy Creek roads, a winding road that crosses the trickle that is usually Brushy Creek.

But in the dying days of August, 1995, Tropical Storm Jerry parked over South Carolina, bringing gargantuan rains and flooding. The culvert on Hammett Road was no match for the newly engorged Brushy Creek. The road disappeared beneath its swirling, muddy waters.

Michael Douty was 18, a tall, good-looking baseball player who had just graduated from Riverside High School. He and his friends were out on a Saturday night during the storm, traveling in several cars from someone's house, where they'd watched movies, to a McDonalds.

As they attempted to go home around midnight, the teen-agers' cars headed into the pouring rain along Hammett Road.

The driver of the first car stopped when his wheels slid below water. The teen-agers were amazed and jumped out to see the churning expanse of water covering this familiar road.

The girls laughed and splashed as the water swirled around their knees. All that water couldn't get through the culvert and so it spewed high at the entrance, creating a powerful suction.

One girl felt her sandals being ripped off her feet. Her laughter turned to fear, and she called out a warning to her friends to stay back.

Then, the unthinkable happened. She felt the suction pulling her into the swirling waters, into the culvert itself. As her friends watched in disbelief, she disappeared into the murky waters.

Michael Douty was her good friend. They had gone to Riverside's prom together the year before.

As he saw her vanish into the dark, heaving waters, he didn't hesitate. He splashed over to the spot where she had gone under, and jumped feet-first into the cascading water at the culvert's entrance.

The other young men grasped Michael's arms and tried to prevent him from being dragged underneath the road, but the surge was too powerful and it tugged him from their grasp.

In a moment, they heard a cry. The girl popped up on the other side of the road, shaken but alive. They sagged with relief, and waited for Michael to pop out, too.

And waited. And waited.

And then they called for help. Rescuers couldn't do much in the dark and rain that prevailed throughout the long, drenching night.

The next morning, Michael's church cancelled services, and teams went out into the water-soaked woods around Hammett Road in search of him. They found the 18-year-old's body in the woods of Brushy Creek, hundreds of feet from the culvert that had spit him out.

His friends were inconsolable, blaming themselves for the chain of events that led to Michael's death. In those weeks following, after the sun came out, they parked their cars along Hammett Road for hours and hours each day and played Michael's favorite songs. They

took white paint and wrote in the road: **“Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.”** John 15: 13 (KJV).

The quote, of course, was from Jesus, and he was referring to his impending death on the cross. The gospel of John tells us that Jesus spoke these words as he said farewell to his disciples: **“This is my commandment, that you love one another, as I have loved you. Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.”**

Michael’s friends went off to college that fall, and many of them had a very hard time getting over his death. Riverside High dedicated a flagpole near the baseball field in his honor. And in 1997, he received a posthumous Carnegie Hero medal for trying to save the life of his friend.

The Bible is full of references to the honor of giving up one’s life for another. There’s a passage in John’s gospel in which Jesus wants to go back to Bethany because his friend Lazarus has died. The other disciples say, *Oh, no! Those people want to kill you!*

But the disciple Thomas says to the rest of them, **“Let us also go, that we may die with him.”** (John 11:16)

Sometimes the language is literal, as with Thomas’ very real possibility of getting stoned to death alongside Jesus. Sometimes the language is symbolic. Let the sinful person die, so that he might live anew in Christ Jesus.

In today's Scripture passage, we find this language in the letter of 1John that we've been reading. Since there seems to be a powerful link between the gospel of John and the epistles of John, it's not surprising to hear this idea repeated.

But listen for the twist that the author puts on the idea of self-sacrifice.

Turn with me, please, to **1 John 3: 16-24**.

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.

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?

18 Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action. 19 And by this we will know that we are from the truth and will reassure our hearts before him whenever our hearts condemn us; for God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything.

21 Beloved, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have boldness before God; 22 and we receive from him whatever we ask, because we obey his commandments and do what pleases him.

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.

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.

In the verses right before our passage, the writer talks of the difference between Christians and non-Christians. The determining factor that separates the two, he says, is love.

“We know that we have passed from death to life because we love one another,” he says. **“Whoever does not love abides in death. All who hate a brother or sister are murderers, and you know that murderers do not have eternal life abiding in them.”** (I John 3: 14-15)

Then he arrives at our passage, and describes the opposite behavior of Christians. **“We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us – and we ought to lay down our lives for one another.”**

So far, so good. Stringent, but understandable. The love for each other is not a suggestion for Christians. It is a requirement.

But then listen to the twist in the very next verse: **“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?”**

That is a gigantic leap! John, in almost the same breath, relates laying down one’s life for another ... to helping the needy. We go from an action worthy of a Carnegie medal to helping the needy -- in one sentence.

We go from something very few of us will *ever* be called upon to do to something *all* of us are called upon to do – in the snap of a finger.

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?

This is the same message we read in Matthew 25, in which Jesus says feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, welcoming the stranger, and visiting the sick and imprisoned will be the deciding factors on Judgment Day.

And then our letter writer John continues along the same line. **“Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.”**

All the pretty words don't mean a thing if we aren't living them.

This *work* of Christianity, this truth and action of which John speaks, is found everywhere in the letters of the New Testament. It makes you wonder if some early Christians were insisting that all they had to do was *believe* that Jesus was the Son of God, and their behavior was of no consequence. The letter writers of later generations wanted to straighten them out.

Think of James, my favorite letter writer, who says: **“Be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves.”**

And **“What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? ... If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,’ and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that?”**

Most pastors could preach this message and let it go at that. But I don't think we can do that here. For if you are here, you very likely already believe this message. You don't have to be convinced.

So I think in this place, we are called to go deeper. *How* do we help the needy? How do we operate in truth and action if someone refuses our help? Are we truly helping when we simply make a bad situation more comfortable, more tolerable?

As you know, we study the books *When Helping Hurts* and *Toxic Charity*. The Christian authors of those books worked at trying to alleviate poverty for 30 years each before writing those books.

And they are pretty adamant about the harm that an out-of-balance donor-recipient relationship can have on both donor and recipient. How it can destroy dignity. How it can create entitlement and dependence rather than hard work and independence. How abetting complaints and criminal behavior and drunkenness only plays into some twisted perversion of the gospel.

A young man called me from the Greenville County Detention Center this week. He was very polite, and said he had written me back in December about wanting drug rehab. I had replied that David Gay would visit him and try to get him into one upon his release.

Now he was on the phone, saying David hadn't been to see him. Well, I thought that was odd. David is at the jail at least three times a week.

So I emailed David to see if this young man had somehow slipped through the cracks. David brought me his file – to show me that he had made *six offers of rehab*, and the young man had never followed through.

Now what he was after was for David to get him out of jail. David said, “I do not want to play Charlie Brown to his Lucy and the football again.”

So how are we to take John’s words in a time and place that he could never have envisioned?

The only way we have found is to invite people to take part, to take responsibility, to belong. Because neediness goes so far beyond what John calls “the world’s goods.” Everyone also needs to feel a part of something.

Help can take many, many forms. And repeatedly handing over the world’s goods is not only unhelpful, but sometimes harmful. Sometimes toxic.

This is a constantly moving target, and we are never sure we get it right. But we keep trying.

We keep inviting people in to talk. To attend the Round Table with Robin and Don and Cheri. To meet with Morgan about leaving the sex trade. To consider Triune Circles. To think creatively about not just eating tonight, but about taking action to be able buy meals and a roof overhead in the future.

Here in Greenville, South Carolina, chances are we’re not going to be asked to lay down our lives for a Christian brother or sister. We’re not going to be asked to show our love for Jesus in that way.

We *are* going to be asked to show our love for Jesus through our service to each other.

“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.”

We are not promised a sparing of pain for our obedience any more than Michael Douty was, any more than Jesus was.

We are, however, promised a rather amazing thing – a little promise tucked into the last verse of this passage. We are promised that in obeying his commandment, we become living vessels of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit comes to live in us, abide in us.

“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. ”

I find this entire passage in 1 John remarkable.

First, that laying down one’s life and loving a needy neighbor are presented as parallels, as corollaries. That our heavenly Father appreciates simple acts of loving kindness as much as great acts of heroism.

And second, that in return for loving the needy neighbor, the Holy Spirit moves into the neighborhood.

Amen.