

Where to now, St. John?
Psalm 23; 1 John 3: 16-24
Fourth Sunday of Easter
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By Pastor Peter Blank

Where to now, St. John? Being Relevant

That phrase is borrowed from the comedy sketch by Ellen Degeneres. She had taken a break from the comedy circuit and was coming back to it. She was challenged to relevant. I believe she was and is relevant.

We all know that there are certain physical characteristics that are totally unique to each individual. Your fingerprints, for example, are entirely unique—no one else has fingerprints exactly like yours. The pattern of your iris, the colored part of your eye, is totally unique. So is your DNA. But did you know that your heartbeat is completely unique too? Every person on earth has a different heartbeat pattern, or “cardiac signature.” Your cardiac signature cannot be altered or disguised. So, if someone can measure your “cardiac signature,” they can identify you, even in a big crowd of people.

In fact—and this is pretty scary to me—the Pentagon has built a laser that can identify people by their heartbeat from 600 feet away. There are positive uses for this technology, of course. Doctors could monitor your heart health from far away. This laser could also be used to track criminals or terrorists from long distances away. But, again, for those of us concerned about privacy, the thought is a little disconcerting.

Did you ever imagine that your physical heartbeat—your cardiac signature—could be so distinctive? Now, let’s apply that to our faith,

We don’t need a laser or any advanced technology to tell us what a Christian’s “cardiac signature” looks like. Our scripture lesson for this morning, from First John 3: 16-24 makes that clear. The heartbeat of the Christian is to love others with the sacrificial love of Jesus. Not a warm and fuzzy feeling. Not with good intentions or encouraging words. But with loving actions. Actions that cost us something. As verse 18 reads, “. . . let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth.” Talk is cheap, the writer of this passage is saying. Real love is costly.

Our epistle lesson for the morning was written to encourage church people to be more loving toward one another and to those in need. If we can’t do that, John tells us, we’ve missed the very heart of the faith that Christ gave us.

Al Lingren, a professor at Garrett Theological Seminary, had a conversation with his teenage son. Lingren’s son asked his dad, “Dad, what is the toughest thing God ever tried to do?”

Now they teach you a lot of things in seminary. But they don’t exactly cover this question.

Lingren wracked his brain for an answer, then asked his son, “What do *you* think it was?”

The boy said, “Since taking science in school, I thought the creation of the world might be the hardest thing God ever tried to do, and in Sunday school we got to talking about some of the miracles, and I thought the resurrection might be the toughest thing God ever tried to do. But, after thinking about it some more, I decided that the toughest thing God ever had to do is to get us to understand who He is and that He loves us.”

I tell that story because I think that young man was onto something. “. . . The toughest thing God ever had to do is to get us to understand who He is and that He loves us.” How did God get us to understand who He is? First through the Law and the prophets. And then through coming to us in

the flesh, in the person of Jesus Christ. And how did God get us to understand that He loves us? By giving His Son to die on the cross and rise again to save us from the penalty of sin and death. John, the disciple of Jesus who wrote these verses, knew that if he didn't make it perfectly clear what Christian love looks like, we would try to define it for ourselves. He doesn't give us that option. In verse 16, he writes, "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 and sisters."

Being Relevant: The essence of Christian faith is love. That is where we begin this morning. Listen to some selected words from this chapter: "Behold, what manner of love the Father has bestowed upon us, that we should be called the children of God . . . For this is the message that you heard from the beginning, that we should love one another . . . This is how we know that God loves us, because He laid down his life for us: and we ought to lay down our lives for one another . . . Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action." Friends, that's the Gospel: "Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action." Unfortunately, it's not always easy to love, is it?

Many years ago, Jeffrey Collins was director of a nonprofit group called Love & Action. This is an organization that ministers to AIDS patients and their families.

Collins tells of receiving a phone call at five o'clock on a Friday afternoon as he was trying to leave the office. Collins had just worked a sixty-hour week. He was exhausted and wanted to ignore the phone. But he answered it anyway.

The voice on the other end of the line was Jimmy, a client of Love & Action. Jimmy was very sick and very scared. Collins confesses that his first emotion when he answered the call wasn't compassion, but anger. He really wanted to go home and rest. He wanted a couple of hours at the end of the week when no one needed him. Many of you know exactly what that's like. But Collins knew that God's calling isn't dependent on how we feel, but on how badly someone else needs our help. So, Jeffrey Collins headed over to Jimmy's house to check on him.

Jimmy was on the sofa, shivering and feverish and covered in vomit. The smell was horrible. Though he was very careful not to show it, Jeffrey's anger and annoyance grew. As he knelt down and scrubbed vomit out of the carpet surrounding the sofa, Jeffrey prayed an angry prayer to God. But here's what came out of that experience.

A friend of Jimmy's named Russ came in to find Jeffrey kneeling beside the sofa cleaning up Jimmy's vomit. With an astonished look on his face, Russ said, "I understand! I understand!" "What Russ?" Jimmy asked weakly. What do you understand?

"I understand who Jesus is," Russ said through tears. "He's like Jeff!"

That night, Russ committed his life to following Jesus. In spite of Jeffrey's resentment, his loving actions brought another young man to Jesus.

It isn't always easy to love. We tend to withhold love until someone passes our "approval test." We love those who we think are deserving of our love—which is exactly the opposite of Jesus' love. He didn't love us because we were easy to love or we deserved it. He loves us with the very love of God.

Just as Christ laid down his life for us, so ought we to lay down our lives for others. That means loving all people—even those who misuse us, and that means doing good to all people—even those whom we may not approve of, and that means leaving our comfort zone from time to time for acts of extraordinary concern. The essence of Christian faith is love.

That brings us to something else that is important for us to **Be Relevant. Love is our primary witness to the world.** How will the world know we're Christians? By our love. The Rev. Jerry Falwell pronounced the reason for the bombing of the Twin Towers in New York City was

because of the many gay, lesbian and Queer people living in NYC. I can't see any love in Falwell's heart with his pronouncement of God's judgment on 9/11. How unloving to be so egotistical. If the day comes when the Christian church is as loving as its Master, the world will beat a path to our door. John asks, "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 to help?" And the answer is, it doesn't. Many years ago, Pastor W.A. Criswell told of visiting a Wycliffe missionary camp in a remote district in Peru. He watched a small amphibious plane come out of the Peruvian jungle and land on a nearby airstrip. Two young women came off the plane. They were covered in insect bites that had become infected and turned into open sores. Their condition looked miserable. But the young women didn't complain.

They were missionaries, and they had chosen to serve in a remote part of Peru, sharing the message of Jesus with an indigenous community who were violently opposed to outsiders. If the Wycliffe organization had sent men to preach and teach to these people, they would have been killed. So these young women volunteered to serve there. And every so often, when they got too sick from the insect bites, they would return to camp for a couple of weeks for medical attention. And then they would head right back into the jungle. They gave up their comfort and their safety for the joy of sharing the love of Jesus with others. A few months after the young women began their ministry there, the leader of this indigenous people gave his life to Christ.

Love is more than just an emotion or a feeling. Love is feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting the sick and imprisoned. Love is not a passive verb, but an active one. And it is the primary way we share Christ with the world.

Love is our primary witness to the world. As the saying goes, "People don't care how much we know until they know how much we care." But there's one thing more that we need to see.

Being Relevant: Love is a gift from God. There's a bumper sticker that reads: "Perform an unnatural act—love somebody." And it's true. Pure love is not an attribute of humanity, but of God. Our nature is to strive for survival, to strive for our own well-being. God's nature is self-giving love. The closer we are to God, the better able we are to love others. John writes, "And by this we know that He abides in us, by the Spirit that He has given us." That Spirit is love. In his book *The Kingdom of God Is a Party*, Tony Campolo relates an experience he had late one night in Hawaii.

Up a side street I found a little place that was still open. I went in, took a seat on one of the stools at the counter, and waited to be served. This was one of those sleazy places that deserves the name, "greasy spoon." I did not even touch the menu. I was afraid that if I opened the thing something gruesome would crawl out. But it was the only place I could find.

The fat guy behind the counter came over and asked me, "What d'ya want?"

I said I wanted a cup of coffee and a donut.

He poured a cup of coffee, wiped his grimy hand on his smudged apron, and then he grabbed a donut off the shelf behind him. I'm a realist. I know that in the back room of that restaurant, donuts are probably dropped on the floor and kicked around. But when everything is out front where I could see it, I really would have appreciated it if he had used a pair of tongs and placed the donut on some wax paper.

As I sat there munching on my donut and sipping my coffee at 3:30 in the morning, the door of the diner suddenly swung open and, to my discomfort, in marched eight or nine provocative and boisterous prostitutes.

It was a small place, and they sat on either side of me. Their talk was loud and crude. I felt completely out of place and was just about to make my getaway when I overheard the woman beside me say, "Tomorrow's my birthday. I'm going to be 39."

Her "friend" responded in a nasty tone, "So what do you want from me? A birthday party? What do you want? Ya want me to get you a cake and sing 'Happy Birthday'?"

"Come on," said the woman sitting next to me. "Why do you have to be so mean? I was just telling you, that's all. Why do you have to put me down? I was just telling you it was my birthday. I don't want anything from you. I mean, why should you give me a birthday party? I've never had a birthday party in my whole life. Why should I have one now?"

When I heard that, I made a decision. I sat and waited until the women had left. Then I called over the fat guy behind the counter, and I asked him, "Do they come in here every night?"

"Yeah!" he answered.

"The one right next to me, does she come here every night?"

"Yeah!" he said. "That's Agnes. Yeah, she comes in here every night. Why d'ya wanta know?" "Because I heard her say that tomorrow is her birthday," I told him. "What do you say you and I do something about that? What do you think about us throwing a birthday party for her—right here—tomorrow night?"

A cute smile slowly crossed his chubby cheeks, and he answered with measured delight, "That's great! I like it! That's a great idea!" Calling to his wife, who did the cooking in the back room, he shouted, "Hey! Come out here! This guy's got a great idea. Tomorrow's Agnes's birthday. This guy wants us to go in with him and throw a birthday party for her—right here—tomorrow night!"

His wife came out of the back room all bright and smiley. She said, "That's wonderful! You know Agnes is one of those people who is really nice and kind, and nobody does anything nice and kind for her."

"Look," I told them, "if it's okay with you, I'll get back here tomorrow morning about 2:30 and decorate the place. I'll even get a birthday cake!"

"No way," said Harry (that was his name). "The birthday cake's my thing. I'll make the cake." At 2:30 the next morning, I was back at the diner. I had picked up some crepe-paper decorations at the store and had made a sign out of big pieces of cardboard that read, "Happy Birthday, Agnes!" I decorated the diner from one end to the other. I had that diner looking good.

The woman who did the cooking must have gotten the word out on the street, because by 3:15 every prostitute in Honolulu was in the place. It was wall-to-wall prostitutes and me!

At 3:30 on the dot, the door of the diner swung open, and in came Agnes and her friend. I had everybody ready (after all, I was kind of the M.C. of the affair) and when they came in we all screamed, "Happy birthday!"

Never have I seen a person so flabbergasted so stunned so shaken. Her mouth fell open. Her legs seemed to buckle a bit. Her friend grabbed her arm to steady her. As she was led to sit on one of the stools along the counter, we all sang "Happy Birthday" to her. As we came to the end of our singing with "happy birthday, dear Agnes, happy birthday to you," her eyes moistened. Then, when the birthday cake with all the candles on it was carried out, she lost it and just openly cried. Harry gruffly mumbled, "Blow out the candles, Agnes! Come on! Blow out the candles! If you don't blow out the candles, I'm gonna hafta blow out the candles." And, after an endless few seconds, he did. Then he handed her a knife and told her, "Cut the cake, Agnes. Yo, Agnes, we all want some cake."

Agnes looked down at the cake. Then without taking her eyes off it, she slowly and softly said, "Look, Harry, is it all right with you if I mean is it okay if I kind of what I want to ask you is it O.K. if I keep the cake a little while? I mean, is it all right if we don't eat it right away?" Harry shrugged and answered, "Sure! It's O.K. If you want to keep the cake, keep the cake. Take it home, if you want to."

"Can I?" she asked. Then, looking at me, she said, "I live just down the street a couple of doors. I want to take the cake home, okay? I'll be right back. Honest!"

She got off the stool, picked up the cake, and carrying it like it was the Holy Grail, walked slowly toward the door. As we all just stood there motionless, she left.

When the door closed, there was a stunned silence in the place. Not knowing what else to do, I broke the silence by saying, "What do you say we pray?"

Looking back on it now, it seems more than strange for a sociologist to be leading a prayer meeting with a bunch of prostitutes in a diner in Honolulu at 3:30 in the morning. But then it just felt like the right thing to do. I prayed for Agnes. I prayed for her salvation. I prayed that her life would be changed and that God would be good to her.

When I finished, Harry leaned over the counter and with a trace of hostility in his voice, he said, "Hey! You never told me you were a preacher. What kind of church do you belong to?" In one of those moments when just the right words came, I answered, "I belong to a church that throws birthday parties for whores at 3:30 in the morning."

Harry waited a moment and then almost sneered as he answered, "No you don't. There's no church like that. If there was, I'd join it. I'd join a church like that!"

Wouldn't we all? Wouldn't we all like to join a church that throws birthday parties for whores at 3:30 in the morning?

Well, that's the kind of church that Jesus came to create!

Love is a gift God gives to us. And it is multiplied and magnified when we can give it away, when we can love others with the same sacrificial love that God showed to us.

The words John wrote centuries ago are relevant for us today, "And this is his commandment, that we should believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he commanded us." When the love of God truly abides in our heart, we are able to look into the faces of others and see God's face.

Love is the essence of Christian faith. Love is our primary witness to the world. Love is a gift from God. We love because God first loved us. Only as we abide in God can His love abide in us.

Amen