

**Love and Light:
LOVE IN ACTION**

I John 3:16-24

*Believe, love, and obey—
and live with confidence!*

A sermon preached by
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I've been reflecting on our high school seniors and their graduations, and I've been thinking about what a different world they live in than any class ever before them. No other class, at least for a century, has spent their whole senior year under the shadow of a pandemic. So many things that were not even things 18 months ago are now part of our everyday lives. We all live in a different world to some extent.

For about 20 years, Beloit College in Wisconsin put out their Mindset List, a list of facts about the incoming freshman class that puts their world in perspective. They have now passed it off to a different group, but it's still interesting to think about the world these high school seniors, about to go to college, are living in. For instance, for our high school seniors today:

- 9/11 is a historical event that happened before they were born.
- We have always had to take off our shoes going through security in the airport.
- U. S. troops have always been in Afghanistan.
- Vladimir Putin has always been the leader of Russia.
- The primary use of a phone has always been to take pictures.
- There have always been "smartwatches."
- PayPal has always been an online option for purchasers.
- Nearly half of their generation is composed of people of color.¹

In a world as different and as rapidly changing as ours is today, we need a solid foundation of faith. Whether you are a high school senior or a senior citizen, you need a belief system that is relevant to the world we live in and can help you cope with the challenges you face.

Our Scripture text today gives us some great statements about our faith, but you have to dig a little bit to get at them. So to dive into this text, I'm going to take a running start, so to speak, and back up a few verses as the writer leads up to our verses.

Back in verse 11, he says, "*For this is the message you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another.*"² This is the foundation of the Christian life, the fundamental

principle, the last commandment of Jesus. We are to love one another. That's not news, even to the original readers. They had heard it from the beginning.

Then the writer gives an example of how not to love one another. He brings up the Biblical story of Cain, the son of Adam and Eve, who murdered his brother Abel. One generation removed from the Garden of Eden, and they are already killing one another. John says to stay away from the hateful and murderous and violent people. That is not the way of love.

Could this message be any more relevant to our world today? Every single day we are hearing about hate and murder and violence all around us. The Southern Poverty Law Center identified 838 hate groups in America in 2020.³ Most of those are white supremacist groups of some sort. Almost all the states—finally even Arkansas—have enacted hate crime legislation because certain groups are targeted for violence. There have been 147 mass shootings—in which 4 or more people were shot—this year since January, 147 in 114 days.⁴ The big news story this week was the conviction of Derek Chauvin, the Minneapolis police officer, for the murder of George Floyd, an unarmed Black man, last spring. While Chauvin's trial was going on, 64 people were killed by police in the United States, on average over 3 a day. Over half of them were Latinx or Black.

Sometimes police violence is unfortunately justified, but sometimes it's not. I am proud of our Fort Smith Police. I love our chief; I love our officers who work for the church. But something is way out of whack here. We need to find a better way. We need to find a way to love one another.

Where can we find a way? I John tells us (as we get to our text today): "*We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another.*"⁵ This is almost a direct quote from the Gospel of John, where Jesus said, "*I am the good shepherd, and I lay down my life for the sheep.*"⁶ Jesus is the way to love. He is the example of the message of love from God. He can show us how it's done. In fact, he did—on the cross..

John then makes a practical application of the message of love: "*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?"⁷ If we are following the message of love, and if we are following Jesus, who is the incarnation of love, then when we see a person in need around us, we will reach out in love to offer whatever resources we have to help in any way we can. That's the Christian way.

Some Bible versions divide paragraphs after verse 17, like the thought is moving in another direction. But some put verse 18 in the same paragraph as verse 17. That's the way I read it as well. I think the two verses go together: "*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? Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.*"⁸ Don't just say it; show it. Don't just give lip service to love; give it life service. Put your love into action.

You don't have to look far to see ways to put your love into action. The opportunities are all around you every day. Mike and Nick Fiorito are social entrepreneurs from Brooklyn, N.Y. Every day on the way to work they would pass homeless people on the street. For a long time, they just passed them by. They were busy; their to-do lists were long. But during one sleepless night, Nick came to Mike with an idea. "Why don't we give them blankets?"

The next day, they set up a simple GoFundMe page telling their story. They raised enough money from friends and family to purchase 100 purple blankets. They chose purple because the color represented royalty. To add a personal touch, they attached a handwritten note to every blanket, each with a simple but powerful message: "We believe in you."

The mission to share love and kindness grew. They started a non-profit called Blankets of Hope. They quit their jobs. They began to partner with schools to get kids involved. In three years Blankets of Hope has delivered over 11,000 blankets with encouraging notes attached. They have partners in schools in 23 states and 2 foreign countries. They have appeared on several national news shows. And they've received over \$75,000 in donations. On their website, they say their vision is to live in a world united in love. Their mission with Blankets of Hope is to

inspire a global movement of kindness.⁹ They are putting their love into action.

When we put our love into action, then we can be sure of our relationship with God. If we are sharing ourselves and our resources to meet the needs of God's children, then we can be certain that we, too, are God's children and part of his family. Our hearts will not be full of doubt or worry or anxiety or self-questioning. We will know. We are on a mission from God. We are doing God's work. We are God's church. Our hearts won't condemn us, and we can live in confidence and boldness.

The Scripture here suggests that we can even be so bold as to ask God for anything, and God will give us what we need: "*We have boldness before God; and we receive from him whatever we ask, because we obey his commandments and do what pleases him.*"¹⁰ This would seem like an outlandish promise, except that it is exactly what Jesus said in the Gospel of John: "*If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.*"¹¹ Can our faith be as bold as that?

What does it take to live this kind of life? What does it take to live with assurance, confident in the Lord's strength, bold in our work and witness? Finally, our text today gives us a bottom line. What do we need to do? "*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. All who obey his commandments abide in him, and he abides in them.*"¹² There are three key words in that verse that may be familiar to you: Believe, Love, and Obey. Back in January we shared a new way of thinking about discipleship based on John Wesley's three key words on his signet. Do you remember? Believe—come to faith in Jesus Christ. Learn the Scriptures. Learn to trust God. Love—stay in love with God through the practices of faith God has given us. Love your neighbor as yourself. And Obey—follow God in service to the church and mission to the world. Believe, Love, and Obey—this is the life of discipleship. This is life in God—a solid, safe, secure, grounded relationship that will give your life meaning and purpose. You will live with assurance, confidence and boldness!

The word John loves to use is “abide.” Living a life of discipleship—believing, loving, obeying—we abide in Christ. The word comes from the Gospel of John, where Jesus talks about himself as the Vine, and the disciples are to abide in him as the branches abide in the vine: *“Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit.”*¹³ Then John uses the word again to wrap up our text today: *“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.”*¹⁴

What does he mean by “abide”? Other Bibles translate this word as “live” or “stay” or “dwell.” The sense is an ongoing relationship. William Barclay suggests that abiding is like a friendship with a strong and true friend. If we have a great, good friend like that, if we get weak or worried or down, we can stay in contact with that friend and draw energy and hope from that relationship.¹⁵ Jesus is our true and strong Friend, and we can depend on him. We can abide in him.

One of my true and strong friends years ago was a man named James McDonald. He had an irrigation company in Lake Village when I was pastor there. He drilled water wells and built sprinkler systems for the farmers in southeast Arkansas. Despite the challenges, James was always upbeat and confident and faithful to the Lord and to the church. He was salt of the earth, and sometimes salty, too.

About a year before I left Lake Village, tragedy struck James McDonald. He was drilling a well, and the rig got too close to a high-power line and the electricity arced to the rig. 8,000 volts of electricity shot through the body of James McDonald. Another worker was killed, and the shock literally cooked James’ right arm and shoulder, and it had to be amputated. For five months, he lay in a burn unit in the hospital, in and out of consciousness, enduring one excruciating skin graft after another, isolated and in pain. At first, we wondered if he would survive at all. When he stabilized, we wondered if his mental faculties would return after all that electricity shot through his brain. It had burned a hole in the top of his head as well. When

he seemed OK mentally, we worried about his attitude. How would a strong, active man like James react to disability? Would he become better, or bitter?

Month by painful month, we could see that James was still James. Though his faith and patience and determination were stretched to the breaking point, he was going to be OK. On Christmas Eve of 1990, seven months after his accident, James came back to church. As he hobbled down the aisle to take Communion, there was a tear of joy in every eye in the church.

That spring, just a few weeks before I moved from that church, I happened by the church on a sunny afternoon. The church there in Lake Village is on the shore of Lake Chicot, and before his accident, James had always mowed the sloping lake bank. I heard a mower going and looked out on the lake bank, and there was James, maneuvering that mower with his one arm, the top of his head still covered in a big white bandage. I wanted to wave, but I was afraid he would wave back and tumble the whole mower into the lake!

Later on, James came up to the church, sweat pouring off of him, looking like a quarterback who just scored the winning touchdown. I said, "How are you feeling?" He said, "Great!" I said something like, "It's great to see you out there having fun again." And James said, "Somebody asked me the other day how I could keep on smiling. I told him, 'Heck, man, I got a lot to smile about!'"

We have a lot to smile about today, don't we? There are many challenges we face, many obstacles to overcome, whether you're a senior in high school or somewhere further down the road. But we have Jesus! We can abide in him. He is the safe and sure and secure foundation of our lives. We can believe in his name and love one another and obey his commandments, and we will have a great life, no matter what else happens. We can put our love into action, and live a life of assurance, confidence, and boldness. Smile about that today, my friends. Praise God for that today!

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mindset_List.

² I John 3:11.

³ <https://www.splcenter.org/hate-map>.

⁴ <https://www.cnn.com/2021/04/16/us/mass-shootings-45-one-month/index.html>.

⁵ I John 3:16.

⁶ John 10:11-18.

⁷ I John 3:17.

⁸ I John 3:17-18.

⁹ <https://www.blanketsofhope.com/our-story>

¹⁰ I John 3:21-22.

¹¹ John 15:7.

¹² I John 3:23-24.

¹³ John 15:4-5.

¹⁴ I John 3:24.

¹⁵ William Barclay, *The Gospel of John, Volume 2* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1975), 175f.