

## Message: "Faith's Litmus Test"

### Scripture: I John 3:16-24

<sup>16</sup>We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. <sup>17</sup>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? <sup>18</sup>Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action. <sup>19</sup>And by this we will know that we are from the truth and will reassure our hearts before him

<sup>20</sup>whenever our hearts condemn us; for God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything. <sup>21</sup>Beloved, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have boldness before God; <sup>22</sup>and we receive from him whatever we ask, because we obey his commandments and do what pleases him. <sup>23</sup>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. <sup>24</sup>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.

It's amazing how driving in this town can be a spiritual experience, namely, how many times I find myself praying while driving my car - when, for instance, I nearly hit someone who cuts me off, or I see flashing lights in my rearview mirror, or I find myself on Reserve during rush hour (which is a misnomer if there ever was one, for no one is rushing anywhere!). I pray and pray and pray, that I won't get hit by a reckless driver, or won't get a ticket for some traffic violation, or will eventually get to my destination on the same day.....yes, I pray a lot when I drive.

But not always those kinds of prayers - sometimes it's a little more cerebral. Take, for instance, this past Friday, when I was driving passively down a street near my home, when a car burst out of a side street right in front of me, causing me to slam on my brakes and say one of those prayers I mentioned earlier - OK, I'll admit I said the prayer after I had said something rather uncomplimentary about their driving (something that rhymes with "spam it all to bell"). Heart racing, feet on the brakes, prayer lingering, I found myself about two feet from the back of that car; and that's when I saw it - a bumper sticker. A very small bumper sticker. An unusually small bumper sticker. A bumper sticker designed for someone who was driving too close to that car. I had to squint to read what it said, but finally made out its message; it said, "Could you maybe learn to drive?" And my mind screamed "THE NERVE!" To have such a message aimed at me! This, upon a vehicle which failed to stop at a stop sign, infringed upon my right of way, failed to acknowledge said transgression, and generally drove as if THEY didn't know how to drive! How incredibly ironic and hypocritical to have such a bumper sticker on their backside and drive so horrendously, for no matter what that

bumper sticker said, it was the actual driving that mattered. And it was clear to me, at least, that the person driving the car that cut me off should, maybe, learn to actually drive.

As it is with bumper stickers about driving and actual driving, so it is with declarations of faith and actual faith. There can be great distances between the two. So very often, faith is pronounced with great fanfare and eloquent statements of professed belief which has little correlation to the way one lives; so very often, Jesus is more a marketing tool than a messiah. There are persons out there who attempt to make Jesus follow their lead. We know this is completely backwards, but what to do about it when so many practice misrepresenting God? So very often the actions and living and practice of that advertised personal faith does not match what Jesus enacted and lived and practiced with his life, Bibles are sold for \$59.99 emblazoned with the politician's name on the front as testimony for the supposed faith worth voting for; crosses are combined with flags for a statement promoting Christian nationalism; statements of being a (and I quote) "Bible-believing Christian" are tied to stances that devalue differences and upvalue conformity to their narrow version of righteousness; the slogan "God bless America" is used to gain votes rather than acknowledge our need for God, nationally or otherwise (and, besides, what would a blessing by God look like in our country? Something like military success? Or more like economic justice?)

Do such displays signify authentic faith as their author's intend? Are they evidence of faith's integrity in the individual's life or work - or are they precisely the opposite? Do they represent a distortion of God's will, a conscription of the Gospel for human gain? Are they actions borne of self-service and self-promotion rather than actions motivated by the great commandment, love God and love your neighbor as yourself?

It begs a question we must ask and pursue, namely -- How do you know if someone's faith is authentic?

It's a question we avoid like the plague for fear of being judgmental of others; how dare we look critically at the faith of another person! And yet, if we do not look critically at the faith of other people - most notably, those who work hard to

advertise their faith, who speak confidently of their belief system, who state with absolute certainty that they know the will and mind of God - we risk being misled; we risk confusing their agenda with God's.

So, how do we know if someone who claims faith, actually has faith? Authentic faith, that is?

Our passage from 1 John helps us get back to the basics - and it is not complicated, even as it is not easy. Let me clarify - faith is an easy thing to claim, but not an easy thing to actually have.

Take, for instance, the premise of our scripture passage from I John; it says in verse 18: "<sup>18</sup>Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action. <sup>19</sup>And by this we will know that we are from the truth and will reassure our hearts before him <sup>20</sup>whenever our hearts condemn us; for God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything." I like the loving in word and speech part, don't you? I preach on it regularly, our scripture passages often highlight the love of Christ meant for the world.....but to actually love in truth and action the ones God prioritizes, the ones Jesus spent most of his time around, the ones whom he healed from leprosy and paralysis, the ones ostracized by society that he enthusiastically embraced, the unclean and unworthy and impure and confused that he fed with food and affirmation, the voiceless ones he spoke out for to a cold and heartless society.....this is what it looks like to love in truth and action; this is what it means to be authentic in our faith; this is what it means to belong to the truth.

But there are so very many others who would have us follow a different model for life than what Jesus offers. Well and good; it's a free country, there's a lot to choose from, all sorts of priorities and principles and practices that people think will fulfill their lives; we can wish them well, knowing that such things of a mortal nature seldom endure - but when they seek to misrepresent Jesus, we must protest. So many figures, political figures, media personalities, talk show moderators, outspoken billionaires, authoritarian leaders - so many persons are in our world who command significant attention through speaking the language of faith - and they are heard and too often believed by the masses. They must not be taken lightly. Their influence is presently leading thousands and millions to

divert the course of their morality and support agendas that are at best questionable and at worst devious in nature.

Their influence must be countered by demonstration of the principles Jesus actually promoted in two essential ways. For one, we must keep a critical eye out for those who malign Jesus; we must work to recognize and call out when Jesus is being horribly misconstrued. But secondly, we must take to heart what construes Jesus correctly - we must understand that even the right words and speech about faith is not enough for faith to be authentic. Jesus said, "Follow me." Not proclaim me; not praise me; not even worship me; he certainly did not tell us to force him upon others; and he had more than cautious words against those who would exploit him for their own purposes. Jesus said, "Follow me" and showed them with his life what that meant.

So, we ask again, how do we know if someone's faith is authentic?

If they claim Christ but speak more of themselves than of Jesus - be suspicious.

If they promote faithfulness but really mean allegiance to their cause - be suspicious.

If they are selling something sacred with their name upon it - be suspicious.

If they claim God's favor for themselves but identify those whom God doesn't care for - be suspicious.

If they insist on their version of things and refuse to listen or let others speak - be suspicious.

If you want to be faithful to God, you don't sell bibles with your name on it, you don't claim God as your personal benefactor above others, you don't practice preferential love for only those people who are easy to love, you don't prescribe the condemnation of others, you don't demean or belittle or insult or seek to cause harm in any way those whom God calls beloved. If you want to be faithful to God, love.

Love each other; love God; love those who disagree with you; love those who make it hard to love; love the enemy; love those who would seek to do you harm. But love them in a way that magnifies God in all the ways God intends. Love with an

eye bent toward justice; love by distinguishing falsehood from truth; love by pointing out where people are harming each other and seek to dissipate the tension; love where hatred would threaten to consume.

If you want to identify those of authentic faith, look for those who love as Jesus loves.

If you want to have authentic faith, love each other.

Because, in the end, if there is no love, there is no God. Period.