

# *The Measure of Love*

a sermon  
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1 John 3:16–24

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In some houses, you'll find marks on a wall or a door, maybe in pencil or perhaps in crayon, starting down low and moving higher and higher.

Written along the marks are names and dates. What they show, of course, is how tall the children of that house are through the years.

It's a ritual of delight and love for those families that do it, as they together celebrate a child's growth measured over time.

I know how to measure the height of children (provided they're not too wiggly).

I know how to measure a cup of flour.

I know how to measure the length of a piece of string or wire.

I know how to measure my weight (even though doing so may make me grumpy).

I can't do it myself, but there are people who can measure

the diameter of a cell's nucleus,  
the weight of a whale,  
the distance from here to Neptune,  
the speed of subatomic particles.

These all can be measured.

But how do we measure love?

Love doesn't seem to be the kind of thing that can be measured.

Not how we usually measure things.

And yet we know that love is weighty. Love is great. Love is long-lasting.

Love can

reach across great distances,  
plumb great depths,  
ascend great heights.

Well, it can for some. For some, love does have that weighty character.

Yet there are others

whose love is puny,  
whose love is slight,  
who have a love that is narrow  
and short  
and extends barely beyond the self.

We call them “narcissists.”  
We call them “jerks.”  
We call them, and maybe they’ll answer. If they feel like it.  
How do we measure love?



This may be the wrong question.  
At least, it may be the wrong question if the emphasis is on “we”: “How do *we* measure love?”

Because we do have a tendency to take ourselves as the measure of love,

to start with our expectations and experiences,  
to begin with our values and virtues,

to draw from within ourselves the standards by which love is to be weighed.

And yet what I find in scripture,

and what I am taught by the gospel,  
and what I am shown by the perfect example of Jesus Christ,

is that *he* is the measure of love.

“We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us — and we ought to lay down our lives for one another.”

Love is measured by Jesus: whose love was so perfect and pure, so mighty and great, that he gave his life. And by the measure set by *his* love so *ours* must also be measured.

What’s a great love? Big and mighty and true and bold?

It’s not measured in the number of words said.

It’s not determined by the quantity or intensity of emotions felt.

Instead it’s in the act of self-giving. It’s in the active care for another by one who will go beyond oneself and even, if need be, leave *behind* the self on behalf of another.

There is no pretending that it can be otherwise. For us who are in Christ, it makes no sense to *act* otherwise. Or to fail to act.

Because if you dwell in God’s love, you will love actively.

But if you will not love actively,

if you have no concern for the suffering of your brother and sister,

if you have money or food or time and yet are unmoved to help with these when you see a fellow Christian in need,

if the best you can do, the most you are willing to do when you see that a sibling in Christ is hungry or cold or ill-clothed or lacking shelter is to offer “thoughts and prayers,”

then you show that you know nothing of God’s love — and *knowing* nothing of it, you *have* very little of it.

Your love measures barely an inch.

The scripture confronts each one of us, me and you, with this serious challenge:

If you see your sister or brother in need and yet you refuse to help, how in the world can God’s love possibly abide in you?

The answer is simple: it doesn't. In one so lacking in compassion, in one so unmoved either by another's need or by Christ's own sacrifice, there is in such a person precious little of God's love, no matter how many nice-sounding or even Christian-sounding words she or he may say.

The measure of love is how Jesus loved. And Jesus loved actively, supremely, truly. He is the measure of love. By his love our love is measured.



Now what we read in today's scripture isn't an appeal to our so-called "better natures." The word of God that confronts us today doesn't begin with the goodness we good people oh-so-obviously possess. (Yeah, right.) We aren't encouraged to do what we already know is the good thing to do. Neither the gospel nor these verses that bear witness to the gospel make any of those arguments nor issue any of those challenges.

No, the starting point is Jesus:

his love made active,  
his example of an active love of self-giving,  
his command to love actively.

Yes, his *command*.

In Christ, God commands his dear ones to love one another.

From verse 23:

*And this is [God's] commandment,  
that we should ... love one another,  
just as [God] has commanded us.*

Yes, we are commanded to love one another.

This might trip us up, if we continue to think that love is merely an emotion, that it is just a feeling, an internal state of mind or disposition. And besides, how can anyone tell me how I should feel? Tell me what I should *do*, sure, but you have no right to tell me how I should *feel*. Right?

But God's command to love isn't a command to feel. It is a command to do.

It's not a command to have an emotion. It is a command to take action.

Perhaps there are times when you don't feel all that good about someone, even about another Christian, even about another member of this church. Yet you know that this person is hurting,

or lonely,  
or hungry,  
or tired,  
or cold.

You know that you could help that person. But you're just not feeling it. You find it hard to feel love for that person. The idea of reaching out to him or her with active help is just a

bit off-putting. And the idea of giving up some of your hard-earned money, or some of your scarce time, stirs up other feelings: worry, uncertainty, fear, resentment.

I get it.

Yeah, I do.

But that absence of warm fuzzies is not really all that important, because it is not what is supposed to get you started in showing active love toward each other. Instead, it is Jesus Christ himself who gets you started, who shows you what love is, he who loved you actively, he who put love in action by putting his life on the line.

I believe that it's, ideally, like the love of one spouse for another. Such love is not only emotional. It can't be, not if the marriage is to last. There must be action with the emotion.

Just about all marriages have times when the love is not felt. In bad marriages, this might be the occasion

for neglect,  
for cruel words,  
for affairs,  
for violence.

But in good marriages, the emotionally dry times will not see an end to deeds of love. No, these will continue all the more: the regular sharing of mealtimes and plans and entertainments and courtesies and gestures all meant to express the reality that the love which binds them is deeper and higher than the occasional downs and ups of their feelings.

Through the tough times, through the dry spells, a good marriage — sure, even a very good friendship — will continue to *practice* the *doing* of love. And hopefully, blessedly, the *feeling* of love returns.

But as long as the practice of doing love has stopped, then there is little hope that the feeling will come back.

We are told to do love. This is God's commandment to us. He commands us to love, actively, with things that we do and not just words that we say.

What if we don't feel it? Well, if we don't ever *do* it, then we will *never* feel it.

Besides, what we feel is neither a secure basis nor a true starting point for the love God wants us to have for each other. And what is that love? It's a "doing" love, measured by what Jesus Christ himself has done. Christ laid down his life for us. That is how he loved us. He commands us to love each other in that way.

You see, love must be more than words.

It must be more than sentiments,

more than platitudes,  
more than feelings.

Love must be active.

It must be tangible.  
It must be practical.  
It must be physical.  
It must be known by what we do.

It must touch the medical and mental and emotional and economic well-being of others.  
It must really and truly lift up the fallen, and not just utter a soothing “there–there” to them.  
Our love must be visible and audible and emotional.  
Our love must be seen and heard and felt.  
Our love must be visible in actions that speak to the real needs felt by those who suffer.  
Our love must declare our gratitude for Jesus and our compassion for our sisters and brothers  
in him, especially those among them who are in need.  
All this, because our love must find its measure in Jesus.



People of God:  
Our love for each other is not measured in kind words or deep feelings or good thoughts.  
It's measured in action.  
It's measured in deeds.  
It's measured in practical help.  
It's measured in physical aid.  
It's measured *by* the example of Jesus Christ, who loved so much that he laid down his life  
for his friends.  
How will we, who are his friends, love each other?