

“Integrity – Keep It Together”

April 29, 2018

Witness series – 5th Sunday of Easter

Have you ever done a trust fall? A group stands in a circle on the ground, and then one person climbs on a chair or higher area, folds their arms in front of them, closes their eyes, and leans back, hoping that those on the ground will keep them from hitting the ground. My first experience was on the youth mission trip a couple of years ago, and I was terrified!

Or maybe you’ve done a trust walk, where you’re paired with another person who leads you around with your eyes covered. You trust someone to lead you safely. For anyone whose struggles with visual impairment, this is an everyday thing.

We’re confronted with a call to trust in First John. It’s a call to trust in the love that Jesus shows us – love that would even sacrifice for our sake. It’s a call to believe in Jesus and love one another.

These words from First John are written near the end of the first century AD. The writer is battling rumors about Jesus – like that Jesus was simply a spirit who appeared to be human. Some people are claiming that Jesus is not God Incarnate – not fully human and fully divine – not the Word made flesh.

Along with these claims, there was division among early Christians about how they were to live. Some felt that Jesus’ actions set the moral standard of behavior, while others held that believing in Jesus was all that mattered and what they did wasn’t so important. The writer, seeking to follow Jesus, wants to clear up these misconceptions, so he writes a sermon about his experience of Jesus.

So far, he’s said that Jesus really was raised from the dead. God has done something amazing, and it surprised everyone! And when we put their faith in the risen Jesus, we have new life and new hope!

The writer also reminded us that we are children of God. When we claim that name for ourselves, we claim that God is Creator and we’re dependent on God. And living as children of God means acting like it, not just calling ourselves “children of God” and then doing whatever we want. We have to consider how our lives are a response to God’s love for us.

So today we get more practical wisdom on what it means to live as children of God. We move from talking about authenticity (getting real with each other) and humility (not thinking less of ourselves, but thinking of ourselves less and remembering our relationship to God) to integrity (holding together our words and actions in

relationship to our beliefs). **SHOW SLIDE:** This Venn diagrams shows how beliefs, words, and actions come together.

So what would you say about integrity? Maybe it's another of those qualities that we know when we see it. It's a vital part of our witness to the risen Jesus. There are a lot of definitions and responses. Just like the video of the kids reading those tweets, there's something about being consistent inside and out.

SHOW SLIDES: Judah Smith says, "Be the same person privately, publically, and personally." I thought of a young woman named Amanda whom I met when she was in high school, and I was serving in my first appointment. She was deeply faithful and bold about sharing her faith with her peers - not in a way that judged others, but in a way that invited others to experience the love of God. Whenever I've seen her since, she's still the same - just older and still sharing the love of Jesus with friends and acquaintances. She shows integrity – consistency.

Carl Jung says, "You are what you do, not what you say you'll do." Craig Groeschel says, "Your reputation is who other people say you are. Your integrity is who you really are!

First John calls us to consider integrity. I like First John. I had to translate the whole letter in Greek class long ago, but going through it really took hold of me. The writer is clear and direct about who Jesus is and what Jesus means to him and to the world. The basis of our faith is love, and we see it most clearly in Jesus.

But then that hard question that gets to integrity: 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? **SHOW SLIDE:** "A good witness for Jesus doesn't just observe others in need, they help." Perhaps that's another reminder of the truth we heard last week: "A Christian is a person who makes it easier for others to believe in God."

We're challenged to real Christian love – love that confronts us with how to treat people - all people - not just those we are "good" in our eyes, but all people. We're not just called to be fans of Jesus. We're called to be followers of Jesus, and really, we're called to be the Body of Christ - the embodiment of the presence of Christ in the world. God trusts us with love and hope of resurrection.

And the truth is: our love for others reflects the love of God. Being a child of God stirs a response in us – real love that is displayed in real actions. And it's love that makes sacrifices for the sake of others.

What's one of the first songs of faith we learn? **SING** "Jesus Loves Me" But how do we move from "Jesus loves me" to "Jesus loves me, and so I love others?" Not just the others I choose, but even those who've wronged and hurt me, those who offend me, those I just don't like.

And let's be honest, we all have a list. We've experienced pain because of what others have said and done. We have legitimate anger and resentment. There are real struggles. But God's Word is that love is still the call. A tough call – yes – but the call we have.

We're called to lay our lives bare before God. There's nothing that we can hide from God – no sin that God doesn't know about, no pain that we bear that God doesn't care about. There's nothing that can separate us from God's love.

And the flip is that there's nothing that makes us deserving – no accomplishment that deems us worthy of God's love. All there is is a risen Christ who died for you and me and who lives again and invites us to new life in his name. All there is is a risen Christ who invites us to believe in him and love one another - trusting us with Good News.

But love isn't emotion. Our emotions are unreliable – sometimes even volatile. The writer uses the word “abide,” meaning that there's a decision and commitment made. Love shows itself in actions. A friend reminded me that “love may be done, but left unspoken, but it certainly is not spoken but left undone.” One writer says, “To say we love someone, but then fail to treat them lovingly, proves that we do not really mean what we have said.”

Even in the Greek, we can translate “action” as “work.” Love is work. It takes our time and energy. Faith lived out in action is a powerful and expected response to the love of Jesus in us.

Have you ever driven a car that's out of alignment? Think of what it feels like – when something isn't quite right. God's Word asks us whether our tongues and feet are in alignment. Do our actions match what we say we believe? Do we keep it together? Do we have integrity?

Living as Easter people all year round means that we believe in resurrection – that there is always hope and that God's will is ultimately for good in our lives and in the world. Believing in Jesus calls us to more than lip service – than just saying we believe in him. Believing in Jesus calls us to be committed to his work of loving.

SHOW MEDIA: Integrity is Hard.

The reconciliation that we experience with God through Jesus Christ can't simply be talked about; it must be demonstrated. But consider how counter-cultural it is to love. It's not our first instinct and usually not our first reaction. We learn to love as Christ loves us through our experience of love from God and others. Our witness matters. Love is our witness to the risen Christ. Love in action is evidence of salvation because it's only through God's love that we share love. Loving one another is evidence of our walking with God.

One writer says, Christians “should not be known as the finger pointers on the earth, but rather the lovers on the earth – overlooking the faults of others, extending grace and mercy (which is no less than what Christ did for us). Hurting people in our communities should be able to say, “I need to feel loved; I should go find a Christian.” Can you imagine this in a world where the Christian witness is so compromised by hatred and vitriol?

Just as believing in Jesus is more than something we say, loving one another is more than a “feel good” statement. We have to be aware of the needs around us and be willing to respond to them. We cannot love God and ignore those in need. In the Cotton Patch Gospel, First John 3:18 is expressed this way: “Let’s not talk about love. Let’s not sing about love. Let’s put love into action and make it real.”

The writer of First John shares the essence of the Christian life: believe in Jesus Christ and love one another – faith and love. The Holy Spirit is our helper as we seek to respond to that calling. And we don’t do it all alone. The Holy Spirit gathers us together as the church – the Body of Christ – to hold one another accountable. We are responsible for one another. Christian living is a mutual endeavor with God: God invests love in us, and we glorify God by showing that love to others.

There’s a beautiful, powerful word from St. Teresa of Avila: “Christ has no body now but yours. No hands, no feet on earth but yours. Yours are the eyes through which he looks compassion on this world. Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good. Yours are the hands through which he blesses all the world.”

So remember the message of First John: believe in Jesus and love one another. These two commandments go together; one cannot be fulfilled without the other. Our faith in Jesus Christ gives us a strong foundation for how we are to love, and our love calls us back to God the source of love.

Thanks be to God. AMEN.

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

Dear God, help us to come with our faith however big or small, strong or fragile. Help us to come with open hands and hearts – ready and waiting for you to move in our lives. Teach us, by your love, to show and share your love with one another – however great the challenge it might be. Be with us and help us to sense the risen Christ as we live each day.

Go now with your trust in the risen Jesus, and let us love, not just in words, but in truth and action. Believe in the name of Jesus Christ, and love one another, just as he has commanded us.