

The Rev. Dean Lindsey
May 3, 2009
Make It Real
The Fourth Sunday of Easter
1 John 3:16-24

We have a common purpose this day. In fact, it is our common purpose whenever we gather for worship, or attend a Christian Education program, or even when we sit by ourselves and pray. We all want to grow a bit. We want to grow in our relationship with God. We want to grow in our understanding of God. We want to grow in our understanding of ourselves. We want to grow as people, in our faith.

Some years ago, a little boy, seated in his car seat looked longingly at an active construction site through the car window. Only three years old at the time, it was a surprise to hear him announce, “When I get younger, I want to be a builder.”

He loved tools. He loved trucks. He loved noise and construction, but the parents had to ask him, “Son, don’t you mean, ‘when I get older I want to be a builder?’”

“No,” he responded immediately, “that’ll take too long.”

There are no shortcuts when we seek to grow in faith. There is never instant success. There is only the path which is tried and true. It takes time. It takes energy. It takes commitment. Not for a day or a week or a year, but for a lifetime.

The novelist Norman Mailer has written, “Every moment of one’s existence, one is growing into more or retreating into less. One is always living a little more or dying a little bit.”

In the simplest terms, our passage from the First Letter of John tells us how to live more, how to grow. Not surprisingly, the central concept is love. In particular, John points to the sacrificial love of Jesus as being a pattern for our own. He asks, “How does God’s love abide in anyone who has the world’s goods and sees a brother or sister in need yet refuses to help?”

In scripture, love is never just a feeling. It is not a high-minded ideal to be discussed or debated. Love is the activity of faith; it is doing good for others.

In his “Cotton Patch” version of the New Testament, Clarence Jordon paraphrases part of this passage in the following way. “Let’s not *talk* about love. Let’s not *sing* about love. Let’s put love into action and make it *real*.”

Making it real. Actually loving those around us. That is how we stretch and grow.

Unfortunately, in the churches, we sometimes put too much distance between speaking and doing. We Presbyterians love to talk.

In fact, you may have heard the joke, “How many Presbyterians does it take to change a light bulb?” The answer? At least 15. One who actually gets on the ladder to change the bulb, but first three separate committees must approve the change and decide who’ll bring the potato salad.

Talking is a good thing. I don’t mean to suggest otherwise, but it’s not the only thing. It must lead to something else to be of value. “Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.”

There is nothing more frustrating for me than to attend a committee meeting where there is a good exchange of thoughts, some new ideas are generated, and a course of action may even be decided upon, but no one is assigned to do anything about it. The meeting is dismissed; everyone goes their separate ways, and all of those great ideas are soon forgotten.

Our own Long-Range Planning Committee wants to be careful not to repeat this kind of pattern. We do not want their work to sit on a shelf. Or to be filed away for a few years until the next Planning Committee comes along and discovers that the problems identified earlier were never addressed.

When I began a pastorate in Houston some years ago, there were a lot of problems with the building. The most vexing was a perennial roof leak in the sanctuary. We had quite a few Session meetings where this was the main topic for discussion. On doing a little research of old Session minutes, I discovered the issue had come up almost annually for the previous twenty-five years. It was obvious the whole time that there was a serious problem, but steps were never taken to actually fix it. A friend of mine asked me, "If the officers of your church didn't spend all of their time discussing the roof, what would they talk about?" That's when I realized we needed to get a new roof so that the congregation could actually start considering some more consequential issues.

I tell you this story not simply as a cautionary tale about the inertia which can afflict a church but about what can happen when we as believing Christians fail to roll up our sleeves and do the actual work of faith.

A widely published Rabbi named Abraham Twerski has written an account of some of the adventures of his great-grandfather, a much revered Hassidic Rabbi who lived in Eastern Europe. One time, the Rabbi and his students decided to celebrate after the completion of a period of intense study. One of the group members put some money on the table to pay for a few refreshments, but no one volunteered to go to the store and bring them back for everyone to enjoy.

Finally, the old Rabbi said, "Just hand me the money. I have a young boy who will be glad to go," and off the teacher went, for the longest time. When he finally returned with the drinks, the students blushed because it was obvious that their teacher had gone to get them himself.

Noticing their discomfort, the Rabbi said to them, “I didn’t mislead you at all. You see, many people outgrow their youth and become old men. I have never let the spirit of my youth depart. As I grew older, I always took along with me that ‘young boy’ who just did the errand.”¹

There is, after all, something to be said for planning what we will do when we grow younger. Especially if that means being open to wonder, ready for surprise, willing to take a risk, eager to commit ourselves fully to this great adventure of faith.

Because, truly, the Christian faith is not a spectator sport. It is being active. Involved. Committed. Full of life, and connected to the life around us. “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.”

We all want to grow. We want to grow in our relationship with God. We want to grow in our understanding of God and ourselves. We want to grow as people, in our faith. The Apostle John offers a sure prescription: we grow when we respond to the needs of others. We make progress in our journey of faith as we become “other-directed.” That other includes those close to us. That other includes the neighbor in need. That other, most of all, includes God.

It’s easy to tell when we’ve run into someone who is completely “self-directed.” The first clue is that they have trouble talking about anything other than themselves.

Isn’t it boring to meet someone, and they never say, “tell me about you. How are you doing?”

Some years ago, a friend of mine was excited to introduce me to a very well-known figure in Presbyterian circles. We were in a crowded room. The man put out his hand for me to shake, and with his head turned away, he said mechanically, “Nice to meet you.” He never looked in my direction.

Faith invites us to look into the eyes of the stranger, and into their hearts as well. Love commands us to respond to what we see. That is how we grow.

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

I have a challenge for you today. Think about your own life, discuss it with a family member, or friend you trust. Are there parts of your life where you have been all talk, but no action; planning, but no practice? You’ve had thoughts, but no follow-through? It’s an easy pattern for any of us to fall into.

My challenge to you is to address those areas, or at least one, and to take the action to which you feel called, to put into practice what you have planned, to follow through on what you have thought and what God has inspired you to do.

Accept that challenge this day for the love of Christ.

Amen.

¹ Rabbi Dr. Abraham Twerski, *Generation to Generation: Personal Recollections of a Chassidic Legacy* (St. Louis, MO: CIS Communications, 1989).