

Christ is risen! He is risen indeed!

What comes to mind when you hear the phrase “true love”? You might think of the sugary-sweet, romantic, hearts-and-valentines kind of love that you see in movies and on TV, but is that really “true love”? A guy and a girl “fall in love” with one another with lots of emotion and excitement and electricity, but is that really “true love” or shallow infatuation? What is “true love”?

“True love” is simply one of those things that’s hard to describe, but you know it when you see it. For example, a husband and wife love and honor each other even after decades of being together. In confirmation class, we’d call that “loving companionship”, but really that’s “true love”. How about the genuine love between a parent and a child—the parent seeking the best for his or her child and the child loving his parent? That’s “true love” too. The same could be said about the love between siblings and the love of dear friends. They’re all different kinds of love, but all are “true love.”

Valentine’s Day isn’t the only day that reminds us of “true love”. When you think about how we’ve described “true love”, you could say that Memorial Day reminds us of “true love” too as we remember and give thanks for those who paid the ultimate price for their country. Yes, there’s love for country in there, but if you read the accounts of those who gave their lives, many gave their lives for their fellow soldiers. In fact, more Medals of Honor have been given out to those who saved the lives of their fellow soldiers by personally taking the full blast of a grenade than any other injury. Others took a bullet defending their fellow soldiers, including the staff sergeant in whose memory our baptismal font was originally given nearly 70 years ago. You can honestly say that such willingness to sacrifice self for the sake of others, even to the point of death, is a form of “true love.”

In 1 John 3, the elderly Apostle John speaks of a love much like that, even as he encourages his fellow believers to ***“love one another”*** (3:11), but the Apostle isn’t trying to get his readers to “jump on a grenade” for their fellow believers. Instead he teaches them and us about the true meaning of love.

As he wrote the words of our text, the elderly Apostle thought back to Jesus’ ***“new command”*** on that emotionally-charged Thursday night when Jesus and his disciples celebrated the Passover one last time in a borrowed upper room in Jerusalem (John 13:34). He recalled how Jesus established his Holy Supper in the midst of the ancient Passover meal and the memorable things Jesus taught them. He recalled how Jesus had to comfort them repeatedly that night, because they all knew that something bad was coming for Jesus. He recalled how Jesus had pointed them to himself as the only ***“Way”*** to the Father (John 14:6), even as he gave them the heartbreaking news that soon he would no longer be with them yet ***“I will not leave you as orphans...”*** (John 14:18)

In the meantime, Jesus urged them to ***“love one another”*** with a love that willingly sacrifices self (John 13:34). That’s a kind of love not typically found in our world. The natural inclination of every one of us is to seek what’s best for yourself, to answer the question, “What’s in it for me?” Sadly, you see that in every relationship. You see it when couples are dating. You see it in marriage. You see it between parents and children and in families. You see it among friends. It’s not always that we’re trying to use one another, but when there’s the incentive that you can get something out of a relationship, don’t you find yourself a little more willing to go the extra mile?

...But is that really “true love” even if that “extra mile” includes flowers or clean dishes or picked-up toys? The Apostle Paul once wrote, ***“Love is not self-seeking”*** (1 Corinthians 13:5). When love is ***“self-seeking”***, it quickly becomes conditional. There are strings attached. My natural inclination is then—if you don’t meet my conditions, then you don’t get or don’t deserve my love.

Such an attitude can go even further than that. Rather than be willing to sacrifice self for another, your conditional love can turn into resentment or anger or even hatred for those who fail you, those who don’t meet your conditions, those who don’t seem to deserve your love. To that the Apostle John sounds a dire warning, ***“Anyone who does not love remains in death. Anyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life in him.”*** Self-seeking, conditional “love” that’s all about you and what you want and what you demand can actually lead you down the path to eternal death in hell.

For that reason, John points us to the true Lover of souls—Jesus Christ. ***“This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us.”*** It’s John telling you and me, “You want to know what ‘true love’ is? Look to the cross! Look to the suffering Servant, the dying Savior hanging there all bloody and bruised and battered! Look to the cross and see there the true meaning of love—love that is willing to sacrifice self even

'for us', even for self-seeking sinners like us who deserve nothing from the hand of the holy God except death for our foolish hatred! Look to the cross and see how God's love led him to sacrifice himself **'for us!'** My friends, that's how we know what "true love" really is, and we can't find it anywhere else!

John goes on. **"This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers."** Because God loved us and gave up the life of his Son for us, we now willingly sacrifice ourselves for others, even those who deserve it not.

What does that mean? It means you put others before yourself. Husbands, it means willingly putting the needs of your wife before your own. Wives, it means willingly putting the needs of your husband before your own. Parents, it means willingly putting the needs of your children before your own. Kids, it means willingly serving your parents rather than yourself. The same goes for employers and employees, for members and pastor, for friends and family.

It means laying down your life for your fellow believers. Does that mean you'll actually give your life for a fellow believer? Possibly, but that rarely happens in our daily lives. So what does true, self-sacrificing love look like among believers? It means providing the hug and the shoulder to cry on when a fellow believer is grieving. It means actually praying for a fellow believer when they are struggling. It means encouraging some who need to be built up and admonishing others who are straying or have fallen into sin.

Ultimately that love that's willing to sacrifice self is love that acts. The Apostle warns and encourages his readers. **"If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him? Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth."** True Christian love doesn't just talk the talk.

It's so easy among Christians to talk about love and wanting to show love for others, but then we do nothing about it. We express something of an abstract, generic desire to help those in need, but we do nothing, even as we enjoy the material wealth God has given to us. We talk about wanting to be salt and light in our neighborhoods and communities, but when it comes to actually showing the love of Christ to those who need it, we make excuses so we don't have to actually dirty our hands or dip into our checkbooks.

On the flip side of that, there's also the danger of just going through the motions because you know what you're doing is a good thing and maybe God will even notice the good you're doing. Think about this. Cain knew what he had to do to carry out an outwardly acceptable sacrifice to the Lord. He probably even offered the precious firstfruits of his crops, but there was no love there for God or for his brother whom he later killed. In fact, all the "good" he did just brought him warning and later condemnation from the Lord, because all that "good" was neither good nor sincere before the Lord.

When you and I go through the motions in serving the Lord and those around us, people might praise us, but that's certainly not "true love" for God or neighbor. We, like Cain, deserve God's condemnation, but recall John's words. **"This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us."** Again, the answer to our idle talk and loveless action is the love of Jesus for you and me. He didn't have to act on our behalf. We were wicked and undeserving, but Jesus chose to take on our human flesh. Jesus chose to demonstrate his love in perfect words and deeds in this loveless world. Jesus chose to go so far as to lay down his own life on the cross for us. Jesus chose to take our place in the tomb, yet Jesus also chose to conquer death for us and forgive every last one of your sins and mine.

So as dear children loved by the Lord, we are to love not merely **"with words or tongue but with actions and in truth."** In so doing, we show Christ and his love to others. Is there someone in need? Show them Christ with real action, with real help, with true love for their souls. Is there someone grieving? Show them Christ with the comfort of the resurrection and true love for their souls. Is there someone struggling? Show them Christ with the encouragement that only he can provide and true love for their souls. Is there someone who is in a bad place? Show them Christ with the tough love they need and true love for their souls. Don't let your love be mere lip service, but love **"with actions and in truth"** like your Savior.

Tomorrow across our nation, people will pause to honor those who gave the ultimate sacrifice. Perhaps it was for love of country. Perhaps it was for love of the freedoms we enjoy. Perhaps it was for love of those with whom they served—a self-sacrificing love that demonstrated itself in action. Our Savior's love for you and me was self-sacrificing and demonstrated itself in action too, but his love is different. His love wasn't just demonstrated when he gave his life on the cross, but it's demonstrated day after day when he sends his Holy Spirit to bring souls to faith through the Gospel. It's demonstrated day after day when he pours out forgiveness

on undeserving sinners like you and me, and it's demonstrated when he graciously brings us home to heaven. That's what the truest love really is. May the Lord of love enable us to love one another with that same living love. Amen.