

The First Baptist Church, Midland  
October 4, 2009  
I John 3:18-24; 4:7-12

***“Love Lifted Me!”***

A Sermon by the Rev. John P. Dick  
Theme: God’s Love and Our Response

Are you familiar with the name, Dick Beardsley? If you are a distance runner and take your sport seriously, the chances are good you are for Dick Beardsley is – or perhaps I should say – Dick Beardsley was a world class marathon runner. In fact, in 1982 he shocked the sporting world by finishing second in the Boston Marathon. Not bad for a Minnesota farmer. He lost by two seconds to a runner named Alberto Salazar in a contest many refer to as the most memorable moment in marathon history. You see, it’s memorable not only because of the time differential but because of the motorcycle that cut Beardsley off near the end of the race. Believe it or not, this very special runner didn’t let that experience sour him.

But then tragedy struck. While working on his farm, his pant leg became entangled in a piece of farm equipment. The machine literally wrapped him around a shaft, whipping his body to the ground repeatedly. The surgeons told him he would probably never walk again let alone run. And to make things even more complicated, Beardsley became addicted to pain killing drugs during his recovery.

Yet once more this man’s spirit and attitude won the day because four years later following some rather intense physical therapy, Dick Beardsley ran in a 10K race. No, it wasn’t a marathon but it was a miracle. In fact, that is exactly what the doctors called it.

Beardsley agreed and admitted that it could never have happened without the acts of love and concern and the prayers shown by friends, neighbors and even unknown admirers. For example, he had no insurance to cover his medical expenses but a fund was started and contributions poured in. And from the moment of the accident, those same neighbors and friends provided food, labor to keep his farm operating and encouragement. They saw this world class runner and his wife through their tragedy and today Beardsley is quick to tell you, *Love lifted me!*

What a beautiful illustration of the encouragement John is sharing when he writes: **“Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.”** (I John 3:18) A profound directive don’t you think, and on this World Communion Sunday, could there be a more appropriate message? Let’s think about that for a few minutes.

As we revisit the words expressed in the third and fourth chapters of I John, I sense three important lessons emerging. I’m confident you may very well discover even more. But let me briefly share these three.

First of all, it seems clear through reading these words that love is the essence of life. Look at the six verses in chapter four once again. If you take the time to count, you will discover that in this short span John uses the word *love* sixteen times. It is like a refrain that he cannot repeat often enough. He wants to make sure we do not miss his point – love *is* the essence of life.

Do you remember the Broadway musical *Les Miserables* based upon Victor Hugo's novel? The hero of the story is Jean Valjean, a man imprisoned for 18 years because he stole bread to feed his sister's hungry child. Upon being released from prison, Valjean gets into trouble with the law again. But this time a kind bishop intervenes to give him another chance to redeem himself. And yes, Valjean succeeds vowing to spend the rest of his life helping others and that is what he does.

Now the particular part I am thinking about comes at the end of the musical just before Valjean dies. It is here that he sings some of the most memorable and moving lines of the whole play: *Take my hand and lead me to salvation. Take my love for love is everlasting...* Valjean discovered what John wrote about and what Jesus sacrificed himself to prove – love is the essence of life... it is the purpose of life. There is no better way to achieve fulfillment and no better way to discover your meaning.

Then there is a second lesson... to be a loving person demands the best we can give and oftentimes that takes courage. We have heard the old adage *actions speak louder than words*. When it comes to the expression of our love for one another, these words come alive. If I tell you I care about you and then ignore you in your need, I am a liar and I do not truly know God. Now that may seem like a drastic thing to say but it is the truth. John puts it like this: **“Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love.”** And he goes on to say: **“Since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another.”** (I John 4:8,11) It is no accident that the word used for love in this context is not passive. To the contrary, it demands action. It is the love of personal commitment and sacrifice. It is the love which motivated Jesus to endure the cross on our behalf.

I just finished reading James Patterson's newest book, *Alex Cross's Trial*. It focuses upon the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and the lynching's that were taking place in the deep south in a little town called Eudora, Mississippi. It is a horrible story of man's inhumanity to man focusing upon the hatred the Ku Klux Klan was expressing literally toward anyone who happened to be different but most especially, African Americans.

Ben Corbett is sent to Eudora by President Teddy Roosevelt to investigate the resurgence of the Klan. There he meets a wise old black man named Abraham and his daughter Moody. What ensues is a breathtaking story of violence, murder and fear which is ultimately trumped by the power of love and the willingness to risk all - as Jesus did long ago - in an effort to address the dark side of the human soul. The story doesn't end happily ever after as one might like because hatred is never fully defeated this side of eternity. But as Roosevelt said to the story's protagonist at the end, “I know there was pain, Captain. That's to be expected. Progress requires a certain amount of suffering.”

Yet I dare say it is precisely in those moments when we dare to risk and reach out in love that our lives are changed and our little corner of the world becomes much brighter.

Joseph Sittler in his book, *Grace Notes and Other Fragments*, once wrote about what he called “the living stuff of love.” Listen to what he said: “Christian belief can never be separated from Christian activity. The living stuff of Christian love is action. For the Christian, love is never just a warm feeling, or an abstract principle. Love is active. Love is alive.” Again, as John said long ago... **“Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love.”**

Moving on, let me share one more lesson about love and maybe this is the most significant. I really believe that when we love, we see the face of God. John says it like this: **“No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.”** (I John 4:12) Do you want to see the face of God? Then love in actions as well as in words the troubled face of humanity!

You see friends, we don’t have to explore the outer reaches of space to discover God; we need only express our care for the person right next to us. We don’t have to pursue some grandiose dream to find God; we need only pay more attention to the poor among us. We don’t have to multiply our prayers and devotions to experience God in a mystical way; we need only minister to our nearest neighbor. Now that is not to say we should ignore our devotional life. But it is to say we must not neglect the ordinary opportunities we find through people to encounter the living God. Going back to our friend Valjean in that musical we spoke about earlier... Do you remember how the rest of that song goes that we made reference to? *Take my hand and lead me to salvation. Take my love for love is everlasting. And remember the truth that once was spoken; to love another person is to see the face of God.*

This morning we are reminded that this face comes in all colors and embraces all cultures. For God loves every one of us with an equal love and shared that love in a dramatic and intimate way through his Son whom we remember at this table. As John said: **God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins.”** (I John 4:9-10) How blessed we are to have a God who holds every one of his creatures intimately in the palm of his hand while allowing us the privilege of seeing his face as we serve one another.

So there you have it... three convictions we can hopefully share with the wider community of faith on this World Communion Sunday: love is the essence of life; our Jesus demonstrates that love is an action requiring the best we have to give; and when we love, we see the face of God. As I see it, this is the heart of true religion.

You know, a young lawyer once asked the Great Teacher: **“Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” He said to him, “What is written in the law? What do you read there?” He answered, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind;**

**and your neighbor as yourself.” And he said to him, “You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.” (Luke 10:25-28) Greater words have never been spoken. Amen and AMEN!**

Dick Beardsley – *Love Lifted Me!*

**“Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.”** (I John 3:18)

**1) Love is the essence of life**

Love is used 16 times

*Les Miserables* - Victor Hugo. The hero of the story is Jean Valjean

*Take my hand and lead me to salvation. Take my love for love is everlasting...*

**2) Our love is an action that requires the best we have to give**

**“Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love.”** And he goes on to say: **“Since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another.”** (I John 4:8,11)

Alex Cross’s Trial – James Patterson

Ben Corbett, Abraham and daughter, Moody Cross

Dr. Joseph Sittler - *Grace Notes and Other Fragments*.

“the living stuff of love.” - “Christian belief can never be separated from Christian activity. The living stuff of Christian love is action. For the Christian, love is never just a warm feeling, or an abstract principle. Love is active. Love is alive.”

**3) When we love, we see the face of God**

**“No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.”** (I John 4:12)

*Take my hand and lead me to salvation. Take my love for love is everlasting. And remember the truth that once was spoken; to love another person is to see the face of God.*