

True Love!
1 John 3: 16-24

The year was 1964, and Nico Jacobellis, manager of the Heights Art Theatre in the Coventry Village neighborhood of Cleveland Heights Ohio was arrested for showing a French film entitled "The Lovers". The film caused uproar in the neighborhood and a short time later he was convicted of pandering pornography and fined \$2500 by a judge of the Cuyahoga County Court of Common Pleas. His conviction was later upheld by the Supreme Court of Ohio, but eventually the U.S. Supreme Court reversed the lower court, ruling that the film was not obscene and hence constitutionally protected.

The words of Chief Justice Potter Stewart in the case became famous. Attempting to define what constitutes pornography, he said something along these lines: I might not be able to define it, but I know it when I see it and that movie is not pornography. The rest is history, as from that point forward establishing community standards became a matter of subjective interpretation and personal opinion of the courts, rather than a general consensus of opinion among those living in the community.

I can't define it, but I know it when I see it. We might apply that same principle to many other things in life. For example, how do we define what it means to be a rich person? It is someone that earns two hundred thousand dollars a year or more? What if that person gives every dime away or uses it to expand a business so they can hire more workers? Would they still be considered rich? Is it someone who makes five hundred thousand? A million? Is it someone that owns more than 1 house or more than 1 car? Is it someone who rides in a Rolls Royce rather than someone who drives a Ford or a Chevy? Or is it someone who drives a Ford rather than taking the bus? It is obvious that being rich is hard to define, but each of us probably think we know it when we see it.

How about temperature? Is it too hot in here today, is it too cold or is it just right? Does 72 degrees define the perfect temperature or is it 74? How about beauty? What makes something beautiful or ugly in our eyes? What constitutes a work of art? Would those black velvet Elvis paintings count? What about a photograph of a crucifix in a jar of urine? Believe it or not a picture like that won an award recently from the National Endowment for the Arts, an organization funded by our tax dollars.

And of course, there is love. Is love another one of those things we can't define but know it when we see or feel it? How do we define what it means to love someone or love something? For some, love is measured by using the standard of quantity. For instance, if someone loves hamburgers, they might eat them every day. If they really love hamburgers, they probably eat them for breakfast, lunch and dinner. If someone really loves red, they probably wear red clothing, own a red automobile and live in a red house. If someone loves chocolate donuts, they won't be able to pass them by in the grocery aisle.

But what do we say when it comes to love and people? How do we know if we love someone? How do you know if someone loves you? How do we know that God loves us? To follow up on last week's question, how will we know that we are children of God? We might easily become one of those "rich" people we talked about earlier if we could come up with a fool proof way of answering those questions. Is it simply a matter of quantity? Can love be truly measured by the number of things someone gives us or the number of things we give someone else? Of course, the answer is no. Money or things can't buy love. How about time? Does the amount of time someone spends with you define how much they love you or does the amount of time you spend with someone else define how much you love them? Perhaps, but if that is the only criteria it might mean our cat loves me because he is usually right at my side, especially when I open a can of tuna fish. I am not sure that he loves me or the tuna fish more. You get the idea.

Love can't be measured by quantity any more than it can be measured by feeling or emotion. So how do we measure or define love? Call me biased, but I believe the answer is found in Scripture. 1 John tells us a great deal about the topic. In chapter 3, we find that love is not defined by words but by action, more specifically truth in action. St John describes truth in action, true love in three ways. The first is our willingness to lay down our lives for another believer. How do you know you truly love someone? Your love is true if you are willing to die for him or her, to place yourself at risk to help another. There is no higher standard of love, no greater love than that. We can only pray that by God's grace we will not find ourselves in a situation where we will have to make that choice.

The second way the apostle says we can measure love is in how well we meet the needs of our brothers and sisters in Christ. Once again, it is a decision. If we have the means to meet a genuine need, a real need, a true need, and we choose to meet that need, it reveals that we love the person we are helping because in a way we are placing ourselves at risk by doing so. Someone who donates a kidney to someone who needs one is a perfect example. Or someone who chooses to go hungry at lunch or dinner time so another person might eat. How do you know you love someone? You are willing to sacrifice your own needs for their benefit.

The third way we can define, or even measure love is in how well we keep God's commandments. The Scriptures are a divine how-to manual that teach us and show us how to love. When we are living in accordance with the Scriptures our heart will not condemn us. We will not suffer from a guilty conscience and wonder whether our actions are offensive to God. To say it another way, our love for the Scriptures will reflect our love for God.

Love is truth in action, and those are the highest standards of love, the ones that Jesus demonstrated quite clearly on the cross. They are divine proof that God loves us. The question is not whether God loves us, but whether our love is true and pleasing to God? How will we know? John gives us the answer in verse 22. We will get everything we ask God for. That sounds way too good to be true and perhaps it is why so many people won't even consider the possibility. I need to be very clear here- God is not promising to reward us for our actions. The God we love is a God of grace and not a God of merit. When our conscience is perfectly clear, when our hearts don't condemn us, when our love is genuine and true, we will only ask God for things which are in complete accordance and compliance with His will, not ours. God is always eager and more than able to answer those needs.

If you are like me, you will admit we still have a way to go before we get to the point where we will always choose to love like Jesus loves. Even so, because we are children of God, we don't just admit our shortcomings and give up the journey. We continue in our quest to finally get it right. By the power of the Holy Spirit, we will continue to believe and trust in the name of Jesus. We will continue to be a servant rather than expect to be served, we will continue to fight the forces of evil and darkness with all our might, and we will continue to believe that one day by the grace of God we *will* learn to love like Jesus.

Truth in action means to love like Jesus. Children of God love like Jesus. Truth in action is the longing, the hunger, the passion for perfect love for God and perfect love of neighbor or as we Methodists put it, reach Christian perfection. I pray we will reach that destination together. Amen.