

## Action

Reading from the Old Testament: Amos 5:14-15

Reading from the New Testament: 1 John 3:16-24

I'd like for you to give your memory a big ol' tug for a moment.

Stretch it out, limber it up, reach in there, and see if you can access the file that will allow us to enter our text this morning. If you will, recall a time, an event, an experience where you were the recipient of unbidden compassion, kindness, or generosity.

It could be when you were stranded and someone gifted you with hospitality, a dry and warm refuge during the storm. It could be that challenging period when you were between jobs but not between bills, when each step to the mailbox was weighted with the fear that it would hold another bill, or late notice, or one of those letters that begins, *We regret to inform you...* Yet, when you most fear the next envelope demanding money you don't have, the mailbox holds an envelope filled, not with more trauma, but hope in the form of an anonymous gift.

Perhaps your memory could be that time when standing in line, a stranger approached you and gave you the ticket you were in line to

purchase; they just had an extra one or one of their party didn't show.

No charge. Just serendipity.

Or your memory could be of that acquaintance who became a lifeline and a life-long friend when your life was unceremoniously interrupted by loss or tragedy or diagnosis, that day the bottom fell out and you were hanging by your fingernails at cliff's edge, dangling over the yawning chasm called despondency. They didn't have to show up, but they did. They didn't have to care so deeply but they did and without hesitation or entitlement took on the roles of listener, therapist, concierge, cook, taxi, launderer, mechanic, and comic. Whatever was needed.

What is your memory of unbidden generosity? Do you remember? How did you experience that crucible? What did you feel? How were your preconceived notions about your sudden saint challenged, or for that matter, how did your assumptions about humanity shift? Was there some sense of God's presence, some intimation of community in those moments? And why does the memory of it remain?

Very often, the memory endures not because of the actual meal delivered or clothes laundered or childcare provided or money deposited or even the advice given. Rather, what made the lasting impression to you is that someone noticed you, saw you. They caught on to a need and decided they could meet it. They took the time, time they didn't even have, and dropped their agendas to meet your perceived need, even if you hadn't perceived it yet. What was revealed wasn't their abundance or extravagance or reputation. No, what was revealed was the character of someone who had been grasped by the eternal truth that God, love, and action are indivisible.

You cannot speak of one without the presence of the other two. The author of John's epistles states it plainly and often: "God is love." And also, this: "See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are." And this: "Love is from God ... Whoever does not love does not know God, for [again] God is love." And this: "We love, because God first loved us."

These persistent themes inform our text today: "We know love by this, that [Jesus] laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another." God is love is action. Indivisible.

Why do you suppose the word count for love is so high in this letter? Because the people weren't behaving. They were claiming truths without knowledge; affirming love with their lips but hating those who deigned to disagree with them; pledging fealty to Jesus, yet behaving, basically, as antonyms of Jesus. Indifference to the poor. Pummeling opponents. Malevolence rather than mercy.

The Epistles of John are among the latter writings in the New Testament. The Gospel of John, the newest of the Gospels, had been significant in the life of the community to whom these epistles were written. The epistles, then, were part of an effort to reframe, reassert, and expand upon the Gospel of John for a new generation, a generation exposed to a growing divergence of opinions on the nature of Jesus Christ. Among these opinions was the inference that Jesus wasn't fully human, whereby his calls to sacrificial living would have been muted by his lack of full participation in the experience of it. So, the author of 1 John wanted to make it abundantly clear that Jesus' suffering was real, that Christ's sacrifice was total, and that this act offered not only the impression of a loving God, but actually revealed the very being of God. God is love is action. Indivisible.

The author wants the reader to understand that to claim to love God while neglecting the needs of a neighbor is an untenable position. 1 John asks, "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? Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action." Quite simply, God is love is action. According to NT scholar David Bartlett, the author of 1st John wants his readers to understand that the greatest threat to their community and to the gospel is "that Christians should continue pontificating about love while they turn hatefully from one another and ignore each other's needs." (David Bartlett, *Feasting on the Word*) Theologian Ronald Cole-Turner asks, "How do we know God's love? It is through God's action in sending Jesus Christ, and through Christ's action of laying down his life." (Ronald Cole-Turner, *Feasting on the Word*)

If this is true to our experience, how do others know what is in our hearts? Cole-Turner says, "Believing in Christ means believing Christ saves us by making us like himself ... Christ is the concrete embodiment of God's love." Thus, believing in Christ means believing in love and love is not love without action.

We live in a time when what Christians are most known for is not love. No, what Christians seem to be most known for these days is casting malevolent doubt about the purity and worthiness of others while virulently opposing efforts to relieve the suffering or affirm the humanity of the vulnerable. There is something deeply flawed with that. When our so-called crusades for Christ are manifested in efforts to muzzle the marginalized, dehumanize the different, perpetuate inequity, and reject the refugee, we have lost our way.

Noted biblical scholar, Walter Brueggemann suggests, "The God of the Bible is not a passive keeper of order. The God of the Bible is not a neutral referee in life's conflicts. The God of the Bible is active, intervening, and has taken sides for the poor and the needy who thought that they had no advocate." (Walter Brueggemann, *A Gospel of Hope*)

In every age, even amidst the church's many failures, there are Christians who have reflected God's love in action, going where they do not have to go and suffering what they could easily avoid, understanding that God, love, and action are one, and that to say we love Christ is to declare we will work to affirm the humanity and alleviate the suffering of those whom Christ so loved.

Brueggemann says, "God's speech is an invitation to us to participate in the healing of the world, living to create blessing. That task is done in many ways and by many means. Conservatives want to bless the neighbor through the private sector. Liberals want to bless the neighbor by government policy. Generous people want to bless by concrete neighborly acts. The vision is of all kinds of people in all kinds of ways, many strategies, many daring acts of imagination, many gestures of kindness and generosity, many commitments to justice and peace in the world. To cause blessing is to transmit God's power for life that God gives to us to others, because we are channels for that power and not reservoirs, the force of blessing given that flows through our lives out beyond us to others. All the others!"

Charlotte was in the national news this week, and amidst all the tough news this was a hopeful story. Greg Jackson was living on the mean streets of the Bronx and found himself doing a year's time in jail. When he got out, his mom, who was living in Charlotte told him plainly, "You need to get up out of there." So, he came to Charlotte. When Charlotte simmered in the wake of the Keith Lamont Scott shooting, Jackson now found himself speaking on national news during the

protests uptown, and he says that bread crumb of advocacy helped him understand what he needed to do with his life. And so, he and Antuan Smith founded an organization some of you may already be involved in called *Heal Charlotte*. "Feeling the need to be a bridge of communication between citizens and their City officials, Greg Jackson wanted to address the real issues that have been swept under the rug of the city for years." The two founders have been able to bring the community together through countless events, starting the #HCDAYOUTHCAMP and training over 80 officers of the CMPD for the new Constructive Conversation Team.

This week's story was about the organization's engagement with homelessness and affordable housing, the move to purchase a hotel to use as transitional housing for the homeless to prepare them for independent living. The secretary of the board, Nialah Sharp, said, "While serving communities, we must understand that we do not reach equity simply by giving everyone equal access to the exact same resources, but seeing those we serve in their individual light and giving them access to the unique resources they need to live and thrive."([healcharlotte.org](http://healcharlotte.org))



Of his experience and his hope, Greg Jackson says, "Somebody took time to make sure I got out of where I was. If somebody spent time to do that for you, why can't you do that for others."

I cannot name the person whose act of self-giving made a difference for you, but I can say that according to our text, you are called to make that difference for others. "We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. 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? Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action."