

4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter – B  
Text – 1 John 3:17

But if anyone has the world's goods & sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him?

### **SEEING A BROTHER IN NEED**

Two deer hunters are standing on a ridge near a highway the opening day of deer season when a trophy-class buck comes meandering towards them. As one hunter raises his gun to shoot, a funeral procession approaches on the highway. The hunter lowers his gun, takes off his hat, & bows his head until the procession is past. By then, the deer is long gone.

The other hunter exclaimed, "Wow! That was the most sportsmanlike act I've ever seen! You allowed this trophy buck to escape while showing such compassion & kindness toward someone's dearly departed. You're a great humanitarian & a shining example to sportsmen throughout the world!" The first hunter nodded & said, "Well, we were married for 42 years."

Some people just love deer hunting, but is that what the Bible means by the word 'love' when it talks about God's love abiding within us? What does it look like when God's love abides within you? Does it look powerful or weak? Does it look difficult or easy? How does it look as you struggle with living for others, versus living for yourself?

Holy Scripture gives that picture as Pharaoh struggles with the issue when God asks him to let the people of Israel go. "And the LORD did as Moses asked, & removed the swarms of flies from Pharaoh, from his servants, & from his people; not one remained. But Pharaoh hardened his heart this time also, & did not let the people go."

Pharaoh was living for himself instead of for others. He was hardening his heart against the needs of the Israelites & concerning himself only with his own desires. Pharaoh's position & wealth appeared to be in danger if he let God's people go free. He was trusting in slave labor to do the work of keeping his kingdom strong. What are you trusting in, besides Yahweh, to keep your kingdom strong? When you see a brother or sister in Christ in need, what does the struggle going on within you look like? Does God's love appear powerful, or weak?

Helping people in need is one of the most potent witnesses of Christ's love that a Christian can make. It isn't natural because of the sinful character of the world, so it stands out. People who aren't Christians will not understand, but it will catch their attention. Even if, like Pharaoh, they've hardened their heart against God's mercy, people notice Christ's love in action.

The problem for us – they also notice when it's missing. They see the lack of faith in our eyes. They see the fear in our body language. They see the selfishness in our actions. St. John goes so far as to say, "But if anyone has the world's goods & sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him?"

To close my heart against someone is the same thing as hardening my heart. It's to tune someone out when they simply need me to listen. It's to wash my hands of your struggles because they aren't my fault. It's to blame everyone else for the troubles in my life, & to accept only minimal responsibility of my own. How does God's love abide in you? **PAUSE**

It's a difficult thing to have God's love living within us. It can't just lie there stagnant. It has to produce good deeds, or die. Living for others, instead of ourselves,

is something that takes constant practice & dedication. It's something that does not happen by accident. It can only be done through fighting against every grain of our sinful, selfish nature.

Looking out for #1 is what comes naturally, reflexively, theoretically even to the point of going deer hunting during your wife's funeral. On a serious note, sin does far more gruesome damage to people than that. The headlines of the news are littered with stories of brutal & vicious behavior that seeks to destroy, for all eternity, people created by God. Satan is the thief who comes to steal, kill & destroy. On the other hand, what it does look like when God's love abides within you, the Apostle John wrote, "By this we know love, that He laid down His life for us..." If Jesus' life is no more than an example to us, that is not a very comforting statement. How many of us look forward to following in those footsteps?

Even short of that, it's intimidating enough just to forgive each other when we've been badly hurt, as Paul wrote, "Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you." So not only are we to avoid hardening our hearts, we are to become tenderhearted & forgiving, as God in Christ forgave us.

The demands of God's Word, the expectations of Holy Scripture, are most certainly impossible to meet. The moment we feel that emotion in our heart is the moment God is calling us, from our stubborn, independent & fallen path, back to the resurrection of Jesus His Son.

If Lent is the time to be focusing on our sins, so we better understand the need for forgiveness, then Easter is the time to be focusing on the life we already have had given to us. Our sins do weigh us down, & in our sin the demand of God's law pulls us down

even further. It should be clear that unless the love of God abides within us we cannot be tenderhearted.

Likewise, if I've made a practice of it, closing my heart to a brother in need is a warning sign that all is not well with my soul. We may not like 'Stop' signs for the inconvenience, but they are for our own good, as a warning. God's law has the same purpose. If you feel burdened by the demand to love your brother in need accept that as a sign of your need for Jesus.

But our sinful rebellion is not a need for Jesus as a mere example of someone to imitate. It's a sign that we need a new heart altogether. If we've been closing our heart to a brother in need the warning is meant to point us not to an example, but to a Savior, & to a risen Savior at that. "...the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord." In our sinful impatience we struggle, although we already have the gift of eternal life, because we don't have it perfectly yet. Joy comes & goes, & it's a constant battle to hang on to the joy of being forgiven. It's a constant battle simply to trust & believe that we are forgiven, but when we do, then we see the signs of it, as we open our hearts to our brothers in need.

We find comfort in verse 20 of the Epistle reading, "...for whenever our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart, & He knows everything." As bad & corrupt & evil as Satan may tell us we are, God is greater than our feelings of failure & worthlessness, & He knows everything. There can be no skeletons in our closet waiting to sink us once discovered.

Yahweh already knows it all. He's known since before the foundation of the world, yet He loves us. And His love is greater than our weary, sin burdened hearts.

Jesus is strong to save us, even to the point of overcoming death. That is the message of the resurrection & the life. It is that message which enables us to live for others instead of only for ourselves.

That message is the good news of what God has done, & is still doing, for our salvation. That is a message far beyond a mere example. Jesus not only leads, the Good Shepherd takes our very place in His suffering & death here on earth. Then He rises from the dead & as we rise with Him, daily, we reach out to help others in need – no longer thinking only of ourselves.

As we fail, Jesus calls us immediately to His promises of forgiveness & life. There is life in nothing else on this earth except the promises & the mercy of our Father in heaven. But His words are not like our words, uncertain & filled with misgivings. No! God's Words create. God's Words call into being. God's Word is the same yesterday & today & forever.

At our death, Jesus will not be off somewhere pursuing His own interests. He will be right there beside us, walking every step of the way with us. In that promise, & in His presence, we have nothing to lose. We can give to our brothers in need because Jesus freely gives to us & there's plenty more where that came from. Faith in that Jesus as our Savior from sin frees us from the power of guilt & sin. It delivers us from the condemnation & dominion of the Law, & it delivers us from those who would put us in our place with the Law.

The fruit of that faith is love toward our brothers & sisters in Christ, no matter how many skeletons we may think are in their closets. God knows them all & is not surprised. He died for us long before we ever committed a sin, but He died fully

knowing it was the only way we could be saved. He showed no interest in trying to escape the tragedy of the cross.

Jesus didn't use this knowledge to escape His task. He took care of us, His brother in need, first. He provided the way of escape, the way of freedom, the way of joy, for us. Thank you Lord Jesus. Amen.

The peace of God that surpasses all human understanding will guard your hearts & your minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.