

Context: I John 3: 11-24

Text: I John 3: 23

## **“The Ought Of Loving One Another”**

We are in the middle of Native American history month and closing in on Thanksgiving. The children dress up in costumes and remember how the early European pilgrims were sustained by the Indian in the land called America. We remember how they gave thanks to God for His bounty and mercy. I recall as a young boy, how I would sit in my room devouring the legends of Daniel Boone, Kit Carson, and Davy Crockett as they encountered the various tribes and learned from them. Like most of my generation, I glued myself before the TV to watch Roy Rogers, the Lone Ranger, and the Cisco Kid.

One of my wife’s favorite books is “*Bury My Heart At Wounded Knee.*” She doesn’t like me to use her in sermons, but I must say that learning about her heritage in New Mexico, listening to the stories told to her by her ancestors, and being familiar with Albuquerque, Santa Fe, and much of the Southwest adds more flavor to this classic book. This book, though, is not written from the white man’s view like most books I read as a boy. The stories are mainly the voices of the first population of the United States. Let me share one brief vignette with you.

The Mescalero Apaches and the Navahos of New Mexico were in the process of being subdued and killed by the soldiers sent to secure the territory for the settlers pressing westward. Kit Carson (also known as the Rope Thrower) was soon in the employ of a General James Carleton. It is quoted that Carleton “had a great hunger for land and whatever mineral wealth that might be under it.” Consequently he went after the Apaches first then the Navahos. Kit Carson, who had great friendships and trust among the Indians, soon found himself at war with them.

On January 14, 1864, three Navahos approached the soldier’s camp under a truce flag. Their people were starving and freezing, so they chose to surrender rather than die. Carson told them they had until the next morning for all of them to surrender or they would be hunted down. The next morning 60 ragged and emaciated Navahos arrived at the camp and surrendered.

Before returning to Ft. Canby, Carson ordered complete destruction of Navaho properties within the canyon - including their beautiful and prized peach orchards - more than 5000 trees. The book says, “*The Navahos could forgive the Rope Thrower for fighting them as a soldier, for making prisoners of them, even for destroying their food supplies, but the one act they never forgave him for was cutting down their beloved peach trees.*”

Stereotypes about the American Indian, as well as other cultures, races, and religions can easily lead to distrust, racism, and eventually the destruction of one another. I am not going to launch into a sermon on prejudice this morning. I do want to talk about our faith, , and cutting down “beloved peach trees”, and how we go about loving one another

“And this is what God says we must do: Believe on the name of his Son Jesus Christ, *and love one another.*” Our Lord and the Scriptures would not stress this ought of loving one another so much if it was not being violated all the time. God commands us first to believe on the name of his Son Jesus Christ, and love one another. To love one another is not a second command. They are both of one thread. We cannot love Jesus Christ unless we love one another, and we cannot love one another unless we love our Lord.

Jesus, himself, summed up all the commandments into one: love God and love your neighbor as yourself. To the Navaho, God, the land, and the fruit of the land, was one thread. It was one matter to fight one another honorably as soldiers, but to cut down “beloved peach trees” was unforgivable. It was like cutting down the their God. The peach trees were a beautiful and fruitful extension of God Himself and were a lovingly gift provided to his Indian children. To cut down that extension and gift of God was unforgivable to the Navaho.

God says to us that when we do not love one another, it is like cutting down His “beloved peach trees.” The Apostle John says something quite serious when he says that “a person who does not have love for others is headed for eternal death. In other words, if and how we love one another has eternal consequences. It either demonstrates that we have eternal life within us or that we are on the road to Hades.

For the Christian, love is not an option; it is an “ought”. For the Christian, building one another up in love is a command, not a choice. This is an important concept to understand, because not loving produces death in some form. Cutting down beloved peach trees, be it through bigotry, patronizing, violence, apathy, resentment, hatred or any other way has eternal consequences. In God’s mind, to not love is the equivalent of murder within the heart. Because this “ought” is so important, let’s take a brief look what love requires of us.

Number one. We must learn and choose to love ourselves in a healthy way. It is a truth that we end up viewing one another as we view ourselves on the inside. The parts we hate in ourselves, we hate in others. The parts we love in ourselves, we love in others. The wars within become the wars without. The peace within, becomes the peace without.

Number two. We must learn and choose to love God. We often make the assumption that loving God is an easy choice and thing to do. To love God takes a lot of risk, a lot of faith, a lot of forgiveness, a lot of grace, and a lot of prayer. If we do not choose to learn of a loving God, if we do not learn to be thankful, if we do not learn to

see God in our life experiences, it will be very difficult to enjoy and praise Him from the heart. These choices have eternal value.

The second point of my sermon is that the “ought” of love is demonstrated by *tangible* behavior. I read a moving story about the arctic explorer Sir Ernest Shackleton. When asked to recall his most terrible moment in the arctic, he told the following story.

He, and the others, were lying down at night in an emergency hut. They had divided the last of their rations which consisted of a few biscuits. Each man thought the others were asleep. As Shackleton was lying there awake, one of the men, thinking all were asleep, reached over his companion, took his biscuit bag, and removed the biscuit. This man, whom Shackleton entrusted with his very life, lived through an eternity of suspense. Was he turning out to be a thief? Was he stealing a man’s last biscuit?!

Shackleton then saw another movement by this same man. He saw him open his own bag, take his biscuit out, and put it in his comrade’s bag, then put the one he had taken out on top of it. This man then very quietly returned the bag to its original owner’s side. Shackleton said, *“I dare not tell you that man’s name. I felt that act of self-giving was a secret between himself and God.”*

The Apostle John said, *“We know what real love is from Christ’s example in dying for us. And so we also ought to lay down our lives for our Christian brothers.”* This obviously seems like a pretty big deal, like the man giving his biscuit to his friend. Because we are not called upon to demonstrate love under extreme circumstances every day these words can often be overlooked. What we are called to do is lay down a part of our life every day for one another. Look at what John says in the next few verses.

*“If someone who is supposed to be a Christian has money enough to live well, and sees a brother in need, and won’t help him - how can God’s love be within him? Little children, let us just stop saying we love people; let us really love them, and show it by our actions. Then we will know for sure, by our actions, that we are on God’s side, and our consciences will be clear, even when we stand before the Lord.”*

This kind of love is not any easier to do than it is to just love God. It takes a choice by faith, it takes risk, forgiveness, grace, trying to see the best in others, and a lot of prayer. In other words, it takes a lot of thought and work. For you see, God calls us daily to give that which we have so much of, because we are all messy and in need in some way. If we are full of hope we can give to the hopeless. If we are full of faith, we can give to the faithless; if we are full of joy, we can give to the joyless; if we are light-hearted we can give to the heavy laden. If we have a talent or spiritual gift, we can give it to one another.

I think you get my point. God’s love is best expressed by what we give away of ourselves to each other. What we give away eventually comes back to us - both the positive and the negative.

This brings me to the last point of the “ought” of loving one another. The blessing of self-giving love is answered prayer.

The Apostle says, ***“If our consciences are clear, we can come to the Lord with perfect assurance and trust, and get whatever we ask for because we are obeying him and doing the things that please him.”***

There is a prayer called the Hypocrite’s Prayer. It is a prayer that sums up what the Apostle John is saying to our busy lives from our lesson today. It goes like this:

*I knelt to pray when day was done,  
and prayed “O Lord bless every one,  
Lift from the saddened heart the pain,  
And let the sick be well again.”*

*And then I woke another day,  
And carelessly went on my way.  
The whole day long I did not try  
To wipe a tear from any eye.*

*I did not try to share the load  
Of any brother on the road.  
I did not even go to see  
The sick man just next door to me.*

*Yet once again when day was done,  
I prayed “O Lord bless everyone.”  
But as I prayed, into my ear  
There came a voice that whispered clear,*

*“Pause, hypocrite, before you pray,  
Whom have you tried to bless today?  
God’s sweetest blessings always go,  
By hands which serve Him here below.”*

*And then I hid my face and cried,  
“Forgive me, God, for I have lied.  
Let me but live another day,  
And I will live the way I pray!”*

The great adventure with God is that when we give of ourselves to love one another, we become someone else’s answered prayer. When we pray, we find that God answers our prayers through one we may least suspect that God brings our way.

The famous preacher Charles Spurgeon said, *“Groanings which cannot be uttered are often prayers which cannot be refused.”* You see, most of our prayers are not for

things. They are groans for love, guidance, wisdom, protection, and God's presence when life goes bad. It is the groans of the heart that God hears so clearly, and they are the prayers He answers in tangible ways through real live people.

It is no wonder that Jesus said, ***“So if you are standing before the altar in the Temple, offering a sacrifice to God, and suddenly remember that a friend has something against you, leave your sacrifice there beside the altar and go and apologize and be reconciled to him, and then come and offer your sacrifice to God.”*** Love, prayer, thanksgiving, and reconciliation are just different threads of the same fabric of living out God's love for Him and one another.

The ought of self-giving love calls us to spare the beloved peach trees, to give of our last biscuit, and to know that God answers our prayers by the way we live our lives in relationship to one another. This morning, I would like to end on a bit of a humorous note with this quote: *“Seven days without prayer makes one weak.”* Spelled weak. Let's ask God how we can best love someone this week. Amen.