

The 4th Sunday of Easter: Holy Trinity Church: April 25, 2021

1John 3:1-7: *“In the worst of times, you did the best of things.”*

Preached

By

The Rev. John E. Higginbotham+

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN!

We all know that there are certain physical characteristics that are totally unique to everyone. Our fingerprints, for example, are entirely unique; no one else has fingerprints exactly like yours. The pattern of your iris, the colored part of your eye, is totally unique. So is your DNA. But did you know that your heartbeat is completely unique too? Every person on earth has a different heartbeat pattern, the medical terminology is “cardiac signature.” Your cardiac signature cannot be altered or disguised. So, if someone can measure your “cardiac signature,” they can identify you, even in a big crowd of people. In fact, this is kind of scary to me. There are positive uses for this technology, of course. Doctors could monitor your heart health from far away. This kind of technology can also be used to track criminals or terrorists from long distances away. But, again, for those of us concerned about privacy, the

thought is a little disconcerting by my thinking. Did you ever imagine that your physical heartbeat, your cardiac signature, could be so distinctive? Now, let's apply that to our faith,

My sisters and brothers, we don't need technology to tell us what a Christian's "cardiac signature" looks like. Our scripture lesson for this morning, from First John 3: 16-24 makes that clear. The heartbeat of the Christian is to love others with the sacrificial love of Jesus. Not a warm and fuzzy feeling. Not with good intentions or encouraging words. But with loving actions. Actions that cost us something. As verse 18 reads, "*... let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth.*" Talk is cheap, John the writer and Evangelist, of this passage is saying to us today. Real love is costly. Our Epistle for this morning was written to encourage church people to be more loving toward one another and to those in need. If we can't do that, John tells us, we've missed the very heart of the faith that Jesus Christ gave us.

When I was a teenager I went to Our Lady of Providence Preparatory Seminary High School. I remember asking my Dad. "What do you think is the toughest thing God ever tried to do?" Now, they teach you a lot of things in the seminary. But they don't exactly cover this question. Dad wracked his brain for an answer, then he asked me, "What do *you* think it was?" I said,

“Since I was taking science courses in high school, I thought the creation of this beautiful world might be the hardest thing God ever tried to do, and in our religion courses we were talking about the miracles of Jesus, and I thought the resurrection might be the toughest thing God ever did. But, after thinking about it some more, Dad said that the toughest thing God ever had to do is to get us to understand who God is and that God loves us. “It’s simple, John our faith is very simple. God is love and God loves us.” Keep it simple, Kiddo!’

The essence of the Christian faith is love. That is where we begin this morning. Listen to some selected words from this chapter: *“Behold, what manner of love the Father has bestowed upon us, that we should be called the children of God. For this is the message that you heard from the beginning, that we should love one another. This is how we know that God loves us, because He laid down his life for us: and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. Little children let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.”*

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ, that’s the Gospel: “Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.” Unfortunately, it’s not always easy to love, is it?

In 1981 HIV/AIDS was diagnosed in America. Jeffrey Collins was director of a nonprofit group called Love & Action. This is an organization that ministers to AIDS patients and their families. Collins tells of receiving a phone call at five o'clock on a Friday afternoon as he was trying to leave the office. Collins had just worked a sixty-hour week. He was exhausted and wanted to ignore the phone. But he answered it anyway. The voice on the other end of the line was Jimmy, a client of Love & Action. Jimmy was very sick and very scared. Collins confesses that his first emotion when he answered the call wasn't compassion, but anger. He really wanted to go home and rest. He wanted a couple of hours at the end of the week when no one needed him. Many of you know exactly what that's like. But Collins knew that God's calling isn't dependent on how we feel, but on how badly someone else needs our help. So, Jeffrey Collins headed over to Jimmy's house to check on him. Jimmy was on the sofa, shivering and feverish and covered in vomit. The smell was horrible. Though he was very careful not to show it, Jeffrey's anger and annoyance grew. As he knelt and scrubbed vomit out of the carpet surrounding the sofa, Jeffrey prayed an angry prayer to God. But here's what came out of that experience. A friend of Jimmy's named Russ came in to find Jeffrey kneeling beside the sofa cleaning up Jimmy's vomit. With an astonished look on his face, Russ said, "I understand! I understand!" "What Russ?" Jimmy asked

weakly. What do you understand? “I understand who Jesus is,” Russ said through tears. “He’s like Jeff!” That night, Jeffrey prayed with Russ as Russ committed his life to following Jesus. Despite Jeffrey’s resentment, his loving actions brought another young man to Jesus.

My brothers and sisters, it is not always easy to love, and it is very difficult to love the unlovable. We tend to withhold love until someone passes our “approval test.” We love those who we think are deserving of our love, which is exactly the opposite of Jesus’ love. Jesus didn’t love us because we were easy to love, or we deserved it. Jesus loves us with the very love of God. Just as Christ laid down his life for us, so we are ought to lay down our lives for others. That means loving all people, even those who misuse us, and that means doing good to all people, even those whom we may not approve of, and that means leaving our comfort zone from time to time for acts of extraordinary concern. The essence of Christian faith is love. That brings us to something else that is important for us to realize. Love is our primary witness to the world. How will the world know we are Christians? The answer, by our love. That’s how. If the day comes when the Christian church is as loving as its Lord, the world will beat a path to our door. John, the Evangelist 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 to help?” And the answer is, it doesn’t.

A Redemptorist missionary priest watched a small amphibious plane come out of the Peruvian jungle and land on a nearby airstrip. Two young men came off the plane. They were covered in insect bites that had become infected and turned into open sores. Their condition looked miserable. But the young men didn’t complain. They were missionary priest for life. They had chosen to serve in a remote part of Peru for life, sharing the message of Jesus with an indigenous community who were violently opposed to outsiders. Their mission was to preach and teach these people, they could have been killed. These Redemptorist’s priests volunteered to serve there. And every so often, when they got too sick from the insect bites, they would return to camp for a couple of weeks for medical attention. And then they would head right back into the jungle. They gave up their comfort and their safety for the joy of sharing the love of Jesus with others. A few months after the men began their ministry there, the leader of this indigenous people gave his life to Christ. Love is more than just an emotion or a feeling. Love is feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting the sick and imprisoned. Love is not a passive verb, but an active one. And it is the primary way we share Christ with the world. Love is our primary witness to the world. As the saying goes, people don’t care how

much we know until they know how much we care.” But there’s one thing more that we need to see. Love is a gift from God. There’s a bumper sticker that I read: “Perform an unnatural act, love somebody.” And it’s true. Pure love is not an attribute of humanity, but of God. Our nature is to strive for survival, to strive for our own well-being. God’s nature is self-giving love. The closer we are to God, the better able we are to love others. John writes, “And by this we know that God abides in us, by the Spirit that God has given us.” That Spirit is love.

Do you see my brothers and sisters, if you remember anything from this sermon, please remember this; Love is a gift that God gives to us. And it is multiplied and magnified when we can give it away, when we can love others with the same sacrificial love that God showed to us.

This is our challenge of a lifetime wrapped in a short story. In a very old cemetery in England, there is a weather-beaten tombstone for a man who was not in any way famous, as far as I know. But he must have been a powerful force for good among those who knew him. Under his name and the dates of his birth and death is this simple epitaph, “*In the worst of times, he did the best of things.*” That sure sounds like Jesus, to me. Doesn’t it? Can we say the same? “In the worst of times, we did the best of things.” In the face of

persecution and injustice and torture and humiliation, Jesus faced his death with courage and grace, even forgiving the men who hung him on the cross. He willingly suffered his awful fate to show us how far God would go to prove His love for us. The words of John written 21 centuries ago are still true for us today. When the love of God truly lives in our hearts, then we can look into the face of others and see God's face because Love is the essence of our Christian faith. Then God will say to you beloved son and you beloved daughter welcome home because in the worst of times, you did the best of things. AMEN!