

Love from the Sacrificed for the Ones who Sacrifice

1 John 3:16-18 (NIV)

¹⁶ This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters. ¹⁷ If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in that person? ¹⁸ Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth.

“Anyone who loves God must also love their brother and sister.” (1 John 4:21b) The Apostle John writes often about love through this letter we call 1 John. Hearing this command, it begs the question, do you love your fellow brother or sister in Christ? I hope that you would immediately answer “yes,” but do you always love them? We’ve got a lot of different people here – people with different personalities, different backgrounds, different interests, different ideas, and so on. These differences can cause friction, rivalries – yes, even inside our church. When we put down our brothers and sisters in Christ, talk about them behind their backs, fail to listen to them, fail to help them, fail to take their words and actions in the kindest possible way, we are failing to love them. When we fail to love them, we fail to love God. “Whoever does not love their brother and sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen.” (1 John 4:20b)

That’s kind of a gut check to start the sermon, pastor. How can we change this? How can we love our brothers and sisters in Christ and therefore also love God? John gives us that key by starting out in our verses today: “This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us.” (verse 16a) We need to first be loved in order to love others.

We know Christ’s love as portrayed with the sacrifice of his life on the cross. Love that allowed hateful men to unjustly nail him there. Love for his enemies as he took every insult, every blow, every hammer strike, every pained breath, every drop of blood bled. That’s just the culmination of his love. Don’t forget that he spent 33 years laying down his life before that. He spent every minute of every day putting his life down for you and for me by obeying all of God’s commands, loving his mother, father, brothers, sisters, neighbors, everyone. Countless times in his ministry he had compassion on people, healed them, fed them, shared with them the hope of the Messiah, the Lamb of God who would take away the sins of the world, referring to himself. He loved his brothers and sisters. By doing so, he also loved God his Father. As John would write later in his letter: “This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.” (1 John 4:10)

Tomorrow is November 11, Veterans Day. As we see extra American flags planted outside on people’s yards, we remember the sacrifices of so many. About 1,200,000 Americans soldiers have died throughout all the wars our young nation has been involved in. These sacrifices were made so that you and I could be here today, worshiping as we are, enjoying the freedoms that we have, freedom to freely elect local leaders to serve us as we did this past Tuesday. About 42,000,000 people since 1775 AD have served in our military - with at least 39 of them connected to our church - sacrificing the time of their lives so that our nation can continue to have the freedoms we have and to provide peace and stability in other parts of our world.

We are called by God to love him by loving our brothers and sisters in Christ. Are all those who serve in our military Christians? No. But we can see in them the same kind of love that Christ showed us and the whole world, a love that is meant to prompt a sacrificial desire in us. “This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters.” (verse 16)

We know how to show our love to God and say thank you to Christ for his sacrifice. That’s what we are doing right now. We come, gather around his Word and his sacraments. We praise his name. We thank him through song and with prayers. Out of thanks for this love, we strive to obey his commands – to love God first and foremost in our lives above everything and everyone and then also love our neighbors as he has loved us.

Some of our neighbors that God calls us to love are veterans. As I go out and about to the grocery store, to a restaurant, to a department store, I see a number of people in fatigues. I didn’t grow up in a military family. I never enlisted. So, it runs through my head, “They willingly sacrifice their lives in many ways so that I can enjoy a whole lot of freedoms. They do this without even knowing me. They do this even for the people who protest against them so that they can have the right to do so. How can I show veterans my gratitude?” The answer has always felt a little tricky because how I may want to be shown gratitude appreciation is not always how someone else wants to be shown that. But John tells us, “If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in that person?” (verse 17)

So, I asked a number of veterans to tell me how to and how not to show them gratitude and appreciation. The answers were pretty uniform. It's okay to come up to a veteran in fatigues or in their uniform and simply thank them for their service. But at the same time, all the veterans that I communicated with said that they don't want this to be made into a big deal. They don't want it announced over loudspeakers. They don't want us to stare at them as if they are aliens or something like that.

If...if you want to do more than a simple thank you to a veteran, I was told "Do this discreetly." You may have the means and be compelled to show the love of God to a veteran by buying them a drink or paying for a meal. If you do this, just arrange it so that it isn't a big show. Don't even ask; just do it. Many veterans said to focus on the younger ones as they probably need your act of kindness and compassion more than older veterans.

Then there is showing a veteran the love of God when they are deployed. First, be aware that they are in fact deployed. Check in on them from time to time as you are able. When I've done this, I've asked what's an appropriate amount of communication. As expected, this varies from person to person. If they are open to it, you can share your favorite Bible passages with them. Psalm 23 always seems like a favorite. A care package is pretty much universally well received. I've done it once here that after a long deployment that we publicly acknowledge that the person is back and thanking God that he returned this person back to us safely.

It's important to not only show the love of God to veterans but also to their families. The Air Force has the "Key-Spouse" program which is meant to care for the family of the one deployed. From what I've learned, it seems every branch of the military has a similar program, but these programs are only as strong as the people who run them. This is where we as brothers and sisters in Christ may be able to show love to these families in a different way than what the military provides.

In the input I got back from veterans, most reminded me that their families are tough and that they signed up to be a part of this military life that includes deployments. So, we should never assume that they can't handle things on their own while their spouse is deployed. However, we should never underestimate the impact of simple gestures and simple acts. Deployment can often be a lonely time for a spouse. Just being their friend is often all the support they need. Hang out with them. Invite them to group activities. If they have kids, give them time to have an adult conversation or arrange babysitting so that they can go out and get other things done or can at least get some "me time." If you're handy, ask if there are any things around the house that need fixing. Offer to help them get some yard work done because, if nothing else, two people can make a job take less time. As a church, as the need arises, maybe we can together to do some sort of meal train or a babysitting night for the families with young kids. Maybe we organize a group of people to help move things in and out of storage for them. Any little act of love and care can end up making a big difference. And you know that it does before God. When we love our brothers and sisters, including veterans, we love God.

I've presented a number of ideas of how to show God's love to veterans and their families, but realize that this is just talk right now. The next step is to actually do something. John tells us not to just talk about helping others, but to live it. "Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth." (verse 18) Maybe I've spent too much time talking about how to help others and show them the love of God. Maybe I never get out of the talking about it phase. For failing to love my brothers and sisters in Christ – veteran or not – forgive me, Lord.

So, as we come to the end, we bring back the fact that we need to be loved first to love one another – namely, remembering that Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. He paid that ultimate sacrifice for us and won us freedoms that no other veteran could have. He loved me first and loved me better than I will ever love anyone else. Forgive by Christ's sacrifice for me, I ask God that he help me love not just in words or speech but with actions and in truth. Lord, help us all to love with the love you showed us. For your sacrifice and your love poured out for me and everyone here, we thank you, Lord. For all here who are veterans, thank you for your sacrifices, your service. Amen.