



“Love’s Balancing Act”

The Rev. Dr. Arlene K. Nehring
Eden United Church of Christ
Hayward, California

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1 John 3:16–24¹ (TNT&P)

ENTERING THE SCRIPTURE

The Rev. Dr. Arlene K. Nehring

The New Testament epistles of John are commentaries on the Gospel of John. So today’s sermon is a commentary on a commentary of the fourth gospel. In today’s passage, the author deals with the topic of love, which was a conversation topic as common in the first century as it is today, and is no less complex today than in the century when this epistle first began to circulate.

A first step in making sense of today’s reading is to note that John, and the New Testament authors in general, were concerned with a particular type of love known to the Greeks as “*agape*.”

Agape had to do with good feelings for another person or a group of people, and was distinguished from other forms of love, such as *philia*, which has to do with brotherly love, and *eros*, which has to do with romantic love.

Today’s passage is part of the Eastertide lectionary, because this season is one in which we experience God’s love story with humanity coming to a climax with the good news that love conquers hate, life prevails over death, and hope eradicates despair. So we sing together Easter’s victory song.

MUSICAL MEDITATION

“Alleluia”²

The Strife is O’er

Al - le - lu - ia, al - le - lu - ia, al - le - lu - ia!

¹ Gold, et. al., eds. *The New Testament and Psalms: An Inclusive Version* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995),

² Text: Transl. from Latin by Francis Pott. Tune: Giovanni Perluigi da Palestrina. Arr. By William H. Monk. Public domain.

SCRIPTURE READING

1 John 3:16–24³ (TNT&P)

Susan MacDonald

We know love by this, that Christ laid down even life for us—and we ought to lay down even our own 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. And by this we will know that we are from the truth and will reassure our hearts before God whenever our hearts condemn us; for God is greater than our hearts, and knows everything. Beloved, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have boldness before God; and we receive from God whatever we ask, because we obey the commandments and do what pleases him. And this is God’s commandment, that we should believe in the name of God’s Child Jesus Christ and love one another, just as God has commanded us. All who obey his commandments abide in God, and God abides in them. And by this we know that God abides in us, by the Spirit that God has given us.

SERMON

“Love’s Balancing Act”

The Rev. Dr. Arlene K. Nehring

Today’s epistle reading from 1 John is a kind of Western equivalent of a Japanese haiku. The passage is pithy, packed with meaning, and not immediately transparent to the uninitiated reader. So today, my purpose with the sermon is to unpack this passage and illustrate how timely and helpful John’s teaching is about love.

As John gets into the nitty-gritty of love, I hear him describing love as a challenge to balance complex options in our divine and human relationships, and how, in particular, we balance four sets of behavioral options stated or implied in today’s text.

Follow the scripture verses in your bulletin as we progress through the text, name the challenges implied within, and unpack each set of options. Then see whether you resonate with any of these challenges, and assess and determine how you may be more intentional in balancing these options in your own life and family.

III

Today’s epistle reading opens with John describing the importance of **loving our neighbors** and the sacrificial nature of neighborly love. John’s reference to neighborly love surely caused his listeners to recall Jesus’ teaching about the Great Commandment.

Remember that several times in his life, Jesus was challenged by the Pharisees to answer their question, “What is the greatest commandment?” And Jesus replied with a quote from Torah (Leviticus 19:18), “Love God with all your heart, soul, and mind, and love your neighbor as yourself.”

Think about that interchange for a moment.

³ Gold, et. al., eds. *The New Testament and Psalms: An Inclusive Version* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995),

“Love’s Balancing Act,” the Rev. Dr. Arlene K. Nehring, 5/3/2009, p. 2.

I suspect that we are all familiar with the part about loving God, and our neighbor. But I wonder if we hear and remember the part about loving ourselves. Even John leaves it out of this rendering of his commentary on love. I find the omission curious.

I wonder, did John omit the part about loving self, because he had trouble with that part too—like many of us—or did he leave it out because his audience knew the teaching so well that they would automatically recall it based on reading or hearing the first few words.

Did John's audience, for example, hear, ". . . love your neighbor . . ." and automatically recall the rest of Jesus' teaching and Torah teaching, sort of like someone who hears a few notes of a song and can "name that tune," or hears a few words to a song on the radio and remembers all the rest?

To be sure, many of us are aware of how Madison Avenue encourages us to love ourselves and forget the needs of others while others of us were raised in situations where sacrifice was normative, loving *only* others, and we learned to hear only the messages about sacrifice—and we still only hear messages about sacrifice. If we grew up that way, we may not yet hear the messages about loving ourselves, and we may need to hear and embrace the messages about self-love in order to love others out of a healthier spirit, and to achieve a healthier sense of balance in our loving relationships.

IV

Another challenge that John presents to his ancient and modern audiences is the challenge to walk the talk of love. In 1 John the apostle writes, "Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action." John assumes that his audience already is talking the talk of love, and so he now challenges them to put their words into deeds.

Unlike John, I don't assume that we are all talking the talk of love. Some of us grew up in situations where emotions were not discussed, where we didn't hear the words, "I love you," and so we are challenged, like Goldie, the wife of Tevye, in *Fiddler on the Roof*, to not only walk the talk of love, but to talk the talk of love.

If you've seen *Fiddler on the Roof* on stage or in the theatres, perhaps you remember the scene where Tevye asks his wife, Goldie, "Do you love me?"

She thinks he's out of his mind and replies with these words:

For twenty-five years I've washed your clothes,
cooked your meals, cleaned your house,
given you children, milked the cow.
After twenty-five years why talk about love right now?⁴

⁴ http://www.6lyrics.com/music/fiddler_on_the_roof/lyrics/do_you_love_me3.aspx

Tevye's inquiry is a reminder that we all need to hear the words, "I love you," even if they're implied in the actions of others.

Regrettably some of the saddest pastoral conversations that I've had over the past twenty years in ministry have been with people whose loved ones have died before telling them that they loved them. So I encourage each of you to avoid being a statistic in my pastoral record book by talking the talk of love, and balancing the talk with the walk of love—be that washing clothes, cooking meals, cleaning house, raising children, milking cows, or the like—in the name of love.

It's important to talk the talk of love because without combining loving words with loving actions, our actions may become disconnected from our feelings, and we may drift emotionally from those whom we intend to nurture.

V

Yes, love is a balancing act. Christian love, John reminds us, is about balancing love of neighbor with love of self, and about balancing "love talk" with "love walk." Christian love is also about **balancing confession with forgiveness**.

In verse 19, John writes about "our hearts condemning us" and God "knowing what's on our hearts." This passage is John's fancy way of saying that we can't hide our thoughts or feelings from God.

While the observation that God knows what's on our hearts may scare some of us or cause us to feel ashamed or guilty, John explains that God is not interested in us staying stuck in bad feelings about ourselves that burn up energy and detract from our ability to achieve higher purposes.

So rather than expecting us to be mired in such negative feelings, God invites us to acknowledge those feelings, learn from them, and most importantly to experience God's grace and assurance, so that we are set free to work through our difficulties to a healthier spiritual disposition.

Forgiveness is not just an attitude, but taking the final step to acting in a different way. When we experience grace, and feel God's love, we are able to go about God's business of showing love to others again, in both word and deed. Grace helps us work through self-pity, and experiencing God's love empowers us to give and receive love from others.

VI

The fourth balancing act that John depicts in today's epistle is balancing what Christians have referred to for centuries as "law and gospel." Put in modern parental terms, I think John was talking about what we refer to today as "tough love."

Tough love is the kind of love that sets and keeps boundaries for children, for families in recovery from addiction, and for groups that are striving to settle disputes. Several examples could be offered to illustrate this point, given a variety of relational contexts. I'll just offer one to get the conversation going, as a sign of my solidarity with parents and all who are in positions of leadership with our children.

The example that I'm thinking of is a video posted on U-Tube, depicting a middle aged mom singing a number called "Mom's Nagging Song."⁵ Imagine if you will this song sung to the "William Tell Overture" (a.k.a. the "Lone Ranger" theme) in operatic style. Here's the link: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K-5P_zFM8k. The opening lines go something like this:

Get up now. Get up now you sleepy head.
Wash your face. Brush your teeth. Comb your sleepy head.
Here're your clothes and your shoes. Hear the words I said.
Get up now and make your bed!

Are you hot? Are you cold? Are you wearing that?
Where're your books and your lunch and your home work at?
Grab your coat and your gloves and your scarf and hat.
Don't forget, you've gotta feed the cat.

Eat your breakfast.
The experts tell us that it's the most important meal of all!
Take your vitamins so that you will grow up one day to be big and tall!
Remember the orthodontist will be seeing you at 3 today.
Don't forget your piano lesson is this afternoon, so you must play.

Don't shovel, chew slowly, but hurry.
The bus is here.
Be careful. Come back here.
Did you wash behind your ears . . .

The performance goes on to quote numerous parental proverbs which often seem to fall on closed ears, but if, on the other hand, these indicatives are internalized, they become the very words that our children repeat to their own children.

The first time that I watched this video, I laughed myself silly thinking about all the times that my sister has called me over the years in total frustration when her kids—particularly the older one—seemed to tune her out. After collecting myself, I typed in my sister's address into my email account, and forwarded the opera diva's aria to Marlene. Mar called the next day, and said that she laughed until she cried when she heard this number, and then forwarded the link to every mother in her e-mail address book.

⁵ http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K-5P_zFM8k

Is it any wonder that this mother got a standing “O” for her performance?

Of course, the audience appears to have been composed primarily of mothers, and the truth is that most mothers, fathers, teachers, and youth leaders never get standing “O’s” for holding the line with the young people in their charge. And yet, this is what love does at its very best. Love balances the law and the gospel. Love is tough at the most unpopular times. Love does what is best for the long haul, not just in moments of convenience.

On our best days, parents, teachers, and youth leaders know that it is necessary to hold the line with children, because this is how they learn to care for themselves and for others, and how they live long enough to grow up and pass along these lessons to children of their own. This is how they too learn to balance and to express love’s twin values of law and gospel.

VII

Yes, Christian love is a balancing act. It isn’t easy to love or to balance love’s behavioral options, but the good news is that we are not alone in this endeavor. We are blessed to have Christ’s example before us, and we are blessed to receive the apostle’s encouragement and guidance in how to exhibit this love.

The key to love, John teaches us, is balance. It’s about balancing love of neighbor with love of self. Christian love is about balancing the “talk of love” with the “walk of love.” Love is about balancing confession with forgiveness, and it is about balancing the law and the gospel.

This balancing act is, in the end, what we find symbolized in the sacrament of Holy Communion. Here our souls are nourished so that we might get up from the table and care for others. In this sacrament, we hear the words of God saying, “I love you,” and embodying that love in gifts of bread and wine. Here, confession and forgiveness merge. Here, law and gospel intersect and form an empty cross. Here, we encounter God’s love in perfect balance, and receive Christ’ invitation to share it with others. Thanks be to God. Amen.