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Psalm 23; 1 John 3:16-24

LOVE IS A VERB

Back in grade school when we all had to learn grammar and were taught the various parts of speech, we learned that a noun is a person, place, or thing. A book is a noun. A woman is a noun. A church is a noun. And that would mean that when we are speaking about love, we are referring to a noun. Love is a noun.

But theology is different than grammar. Theologically speaking, in order for love to be genuine, love needs to be a verb, an action word. That is what the writer of 1 John teaches us today when the writer asks the question, “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 then the writer states, “Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.”

The writer of this passage has noticed a common tendency in us—our tendency to talk about love and the importance of love but how we don’t always *do* love. To be genuine, love cannot just be talk, nice words, good intentions. Love must be an action.

Think about when love has been most meaningful to you in your life, and I bet it has been when love was a verb. Maybe when she stayed up all night sewing your costume for the play. Or all those the Saturdays he took you fishing. Or those extra after school hours she spent helping you master algebra so you could pass the test and graduate. Or the food they brought to the house after the baby was born. Or when she slept all night sitting in one of those uncomfortable hospital chairs so you would not be alone. Or when he spent an entire day setting up your computer, getting you connected to the internet, and then patiently teaching you how to

use it. Or when, despite the hurtful things you had said, she still greeted you with an embrace. Love is a verb. Love is action.

This belief is central to the Christian faith. We believe in a God who does not simply *tell* us that we are loved, but whose love was made tangible in Jesus Christ. God became human, lived with us, loved us enough to suffer and die for us, and confronted evil and darkness on our behalf. We give thanks that God's love for us is not just a noun but is a verb.

We see evidence of this throughout the 23rd Psalm. Psalm 23 is one of the most beloved pieces of scripture in the Bible. While the language is beautiful, we don't want to be fooled. This passage arises out of a time of crisis. We don't know the exact nature of the hardship but we hear the echo of danger and pain and fear within this psalm. But in the face of these hardships, the writer of the psalm declares God's love. And it is not an abstract love. Rather it is a love of action. Psalm 23 is filled with verbs of love.

God *makes me lie down* in green pastures—in places where I will find nourishment and where I will be sustained.

God *leads me* beside still waters and in right paths.

God *restores* my soul.

God *is with me* in the dark valley.

God *comforts* me by having the necessary tools for care and security.

God *prepares* a table of abundant love and nourishment in the presence of my enemies.

God *anoints* my head with blessings.

God's goodness and mercy shall *follow* me all my days. The Hebrew verb used here actually means *to pursue* with intensity. God's goodness and mercy pursue me with the intensity of hound dogs after a rabbit.

Psalm 23 is a litany of action words which express how God's love is made tangible. Over and over again, the writer proclaims the many ways God's love is active in our lives and in our pain and in our struggles.

This psalm has provided words of assurance to people in hardship down through the centuries. They are beautiful and comforting. But I also want to confess something. I cherish Psalm 23 but sometimes, sometimes when I am overwhelmed by the brutality and ugliness of humanity, I sometimes struggle with its promises. When learning about yet another police killing of an unarmed African American. Or when confronted with the endless accounts of human brutality throughout history: the ruthlessness of the European colonization of peoples around the globe, the horrors of slavery, the slaughter of Native Americans, the millions of Jews sent to the gas chambers. The people who suffered and died in these tragic accounts were not extras on the set of some movie. They were *individuals*, who were as alive as you and I are right now, with their own personalities, who had hopes and needs and dreams just as we do right now. Every one of them mattered. Where was God's goodness and mercy for them? When surrounded by enemies, where was the table of security and abundance?

Do you ever wrestle with such questions? I do. There are lots of people in the Bible who also wrestled with this issue of how God could allow evil to exist. So our questions and doubts are not wrong. They have an important place in the life of faith even if we may never have satisfactory answers.

But here is something we do know. When we witness the evil of this world, we see evidence of another verb at work: the verb Hate. This dangerous verb takes many forms—maybe enslavement, rape, abuse, or neglect, greed, and indifference—but hate always creates great harm and leaves a legacy of pain. But as people of faith, we believe in a verb more

powerful than Hate. We believe in the verb of Love. Jesus taught us what this verb looks like. Jesus showed us what this verb looks like. And in him we have come to know that there is power in this verb we call Love. I may not be able to answer why God permits suffering but I know that Love is the answer to suffering. Love is powerful when it is put into action. The writer of 1 John reminds us, “We know love by this, that 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.”

As Christians, it isn't enough just to stand for the right things or believe in the right things. It isn't enough to attend church and read the creeds and statements of faith. We aren't just supposed to *believe* in God's goodness and mercy. We are called to *do* God's goodness and mercy and *pursue* God's goodness and mercy with the same intensity that the psalmist says God pursues it for. We are called to make God's love a verb for others.

Love may mean taking a casserole to the neighbors next door. Or forgiving your sister for the wrong she did you. Or volunteering at a food pantry. Or entering the voting booth to elect leaders who pledge to bring about police reform.

God has shown us what love looks like. Love draws close. Love enters the hard realities of people's lives. Love suffers with and for others. Love is put to work. Love is a verb. And let us never doubt the transformative power found in that verb.