



**“TRACTION”**  
**SCRIPTURE: PSALM 23; 1 JOHN 3: 16-24**  
**GRACE COVENANT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, ASHEVILLE, NC**  
**April 22, 2018**  
The Rev. Dr. Marcia W. Mount Shoop, Pastor

Our New Testament Lesson today is from the first of the three Johanne Epistles. Second and Third John are more clearly written in letterform. First John is more manifesto than letter, but for ease of classification with the other two manuscripts that are clearly letters, it is called an epistle as well.

We are not sure who wrote these three encouraging messages—probably to a collection of church in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century—churches that were buckling under the weight of some formidable challenges. These three epistles are often quoted because of how much the author leans on love to encourage those congregations.

Can this same confidence in love encourage us?

Listen with me now, with open hearts and open minds, for the word of God for us today.

**1 John 3:16-24**

3:16 We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us--and we ought to lay down our lives for one another.

3:17 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?

3:18 Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.

3:19 And by this we will know that we are from the truth and will reassure our hearts before him

3:20 whenever our hearts condemn us; for God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything.

3:21 Beloved, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have boldness before God;

3:22 and we receive from him whatever we ask, because we obey his commandments and do what pleases him.

3:23 And this is his commandment, that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us.

3:24 All who obey his commandments abide in him, and he abides in them. And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit that he has given us.

The Word of the LORD  
**Thanks be to God.**

---

Dear John (or whatever your name is—we don't know, after all, who you really were) "ho presbyteros" is the best we've got—The Elder. I will call you Elder John.

Dear Elder John,

It's been a rough few weeks on planet earth. Actually it's been a rough few months. Scratch that. It's been a rough few centuries, few millennia, since you put out the good news to the Jesus followers in your day about God's love in Christ.

I wonder what was going on to challenge the communities you were reaching out to back then—what were the cracks, the stress points, the things that were making the churches you advised feel strained to the point of disintegration. What was it that made you plead with them so valiantly not to give up on love?

That's why I am writing you today—here in front of God and all these witnesses. We could use some help right now. Back to my original point, Elder John, it's been a rough few weeks here on planet earth.

I am not sure where to start—sometimes it feels like the violence won't let up, sometimes it seems like all the blood that has spilled at the hands of injustice is drowning us all.

Just over two weeks ago we marked 50 years since gunshots rang out at the Lorraine Motel in Memphis and killed Dr. King. Some of us were there in Memphis to remember—and we heard the ghosts from those days, and the days before those days when enslaved people as young as 6 months old were sold to people just like us, when women, and men, and children, huddled in the cellar of a house along the Mississippi River that God must have held in the palm of her hand to protect its truth as a stop on the underground railroad, we stood in that cellar shoulder to shoulder in the dark and imagined the shadows of our country's shameful past and awe-inspiring resolve and resilience of people who believed in freedom, who still had enough room in their hearts to trust another human being after all the cruelty that had been done to them.

We heard the stories of lynchings on Sunday afternoons with ice cream and fanfare—a community activity after church—one even described in the newspaper by someone who must have been Presbyterian—because he wrote that the lynching was done decently and in order.

Then just two weeks ago we lost our friend—a car accident—a split second we'll never understand, and now he's gone.

And this week, just this week, Elder John, just here in this little corner of the world the powers and principalities have shown their ugly hunger to put black and brown people in their place, to criminalize them—scare tactics to chasten immigrants with nefarious ICE raids in neighborhoods, schools, workplaces, grocery stores, and homes.

It's been a rough week on the planet earth—a whole family decimated by gun violence, by domestic violence—children, a mother right here in our town, right down the road from here—a mother working to take care of her kids, trying to put distance between her and a man she wanted out of her life. Erica Smith's kids were students, athletes, brothers, sisters, cousins, and friends.

And all that does not even include the quiet, hidden places where each us are facing challenges—crises of faith and relationship and health and what's next for us.

Were these the kind of things that were challenging your churches, Elder John? Senseless violence. Festering wounds. The wages of the sins of greed, of hatred, of anger, and of fear.

You told those struggling churches, those discouraged churches, those not-sure-how-to-go-on churches that love needs truth. And love needs action. That's the only way love can get traction.

What if love is not enough anymore—what if it never was enough?

---

Have you been looking, like I have, looking and listening for messengers of love these last few weeks, these last few lifetimes? Faces, voices, songs, heartbeats, fresh winds, green pastures, still waters.

I've been listening in the mornings to the sounds of waking up on this planet—savoring the sight of mist over these mountains and the dawn chorus of the birds who sing each day into being.

Did you know birds expend all that energy in the morning with their songs to announce how strong they are? They are saying: I made it through another night. I am strong. I am resilient. I am healthy and I am here. Morning singing birds often each have their own unique songs—so competitors and potential mates know who it is that is singing.

What is your morning song? How do you greet the day with a new resolve to reach out, to love, to tell those who might seek to hurt you that you are strong and resilient and healthy?

Some messengers call out to our courage, to the strength we are not always sure we have. Some messengers encourage us to be bold in the face of challenges—to sing freedom songs, songs of resistance and defiance, songs of repentance, songs of faith and resolve because that is what love does.

Some messengers need us to pay close attention, to seek them out in the interest of knowing the truth, to be willing to hear hard things—because that's what love does.

Love needs truth. And love needs action. That's the only way love can get traction.

Salamanders are small and discreet—many living much of their life in murky headwaters, under damp leaves and rocks—away from the human gaze.

Salamanders are carrying a heavy load for us. Their permeable skin and the eggs that they lay soak in the pesticides and herbicides and polluted water and soil that human beings create. Salamanders are messengers about the health of our home.

About ½ of the world's 600 salamander species are threatened. 62 more of the species are near threatened. Many of the beautiful varieties of salamander have already disappeared forever.

The salamander is telling us something about ourselves. We are hard on the permeable things—the things that soak up our pain, our greed, our short-sightedness. Salamanders tell us about our out-of-sight-out-of-mind way of avoiding the hard truths we need to look at to heal ourselves, to heal the world.

Love needs truth. And love needs action. That's the only way love can get traction.

---

Wild Geese, a poem by Mary Oliver

You do not have to be good.  
You do not have to walk on your knees  
For a hundred miles through the desert, repenting.  
You only have to let the soft animal of your body  
love what it loves.  
Tell me about your despair, yours, and I will tell you mine.  
Meanwhile the world goes on.  
Meanwhile the sun and the clear pebbles of the rain  
are moving across the landscapes,  
over the prairies and the deep trees,

the mountains and the rivers.  
Meanwhile the wild geese, high in the clean blue air,  
are heading home again.  
Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,  
the world offers itself to your imagination,  
calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting --  
over and over announcing your place  
in the family of things.

---

Maybe the hardest message to receive is that we are loved—fiercely and steadfastly loved. And it's not a hallmark or bumper sticker kind of love—it's a radical love that strips away our pretense and our delusions—and lays our sins and our suffering bare. It's the kind of love that meets us in our lowest moments and says—I am here to make you well. And you belong with me.

It's hard to trust that kind of love. It's hard to believe that it won't find out the whole truth about us and give up on us or tell us we really don't belong. Brothers and sisters, can you take in the kind of love God extends into our shadows? Jesus comes into those lonely, tortured places and says I love you and I see the healing that can be yours. Don't give up. Don't give up on love.

The Psalmist sings to us about that kind of love—the love that extends into exile, into pain and peril, into the desert times and the times that start to feel God-forsaken, into our own failures, into the places where we need to be transformed.

The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want.  
green pastures, still waters, restored souls  
fearing no evil, facing the valley of the shadow knowing we are not alone  
Trusting God to make a home for us here. Trusting God to be our home forever.

(Psalm 23, verse 3 of My Shepherd)

The sure provisions of my God  
Attend me all my days;  
O may Your house be my abode,  
And all my work be praise!  
Then will I find my settled rest  
While others go and come,  
No longer a stranger or a guest,  
But like a child at home.

I sing that lots of mornings—I sing it for me, for my children, for my family. I sing it for all of you—because I love you and I want you to feel at home on this planet, at home with God and yourself. Because that blessed assurance of a loving home is

what will make us courageous, it is what will make us messengers of Christ's healing love—not just in words or speech, but in everything we do, in everything that we are.

---

The truth is, Elder John, that it's time for love to live up to its potential.

True love moves, it stands up, it breathes, it sings, it tells the world it made it through another night and is ready for connection, ready to say "I am home," ready to recognize everything that lives and breathes as family—family worthy of our true love.

We are home, brothers and sisters. Home in a world that cries out for more love, home on a planet that is sending us messages of need and stress and strength and resolve. Home in a world that tells us the truth—harsh and exciting.

The world needs you and me to believe in love, and not just believe, but to let love lead the way in every courageous step we take into the world's pain—true love doesn't hide or retreat or deny its wounds. True love believes in healing opportunities in the face of the world's most cruel crucifixions.

Christ's love is the love of Easter—the love that redeems, that harrows all the hells of our making, that fixes our gaze toward eternity, toward the power and the mystery of the love that has not ever and will not ever let us go.

Thanks be to God.