

“Building Relationships”

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Ecclesiastes 3:1-13 and 1 John 3:11-24

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Albert Einstein was a genius. But one physical phenomenon always puzzled him, and he was never able to explain it through rational scientific principles. Einstein called this phenomenon “spooky action at a distance.”

In his research, he observed that electrons which were in relationship to one another at some point, located in the same gravitational field, would spin in the same direction. This made sense to him, since the force of the electrons would naturally influence the movement of other electrons in close proximity.

But what Einstein could never explain was the fact that when these clustered electrons were disconnected and became separated from one another, they still continued to spin in the same direction. He could only call it “spooky action at a distance.” There appeared to be no material explanation for this phenomenon.

Scientists today call this “quantum entanglement.”

At some mysterious level, it appears these electrons are deeply inter-connected, so that even when they are separated by distance, they are still in relationship.

Quantum entanglement is a good principle to describe our life together in the church. God calls us into community on Sunday to learn to spin in the same direction. We hear the same scripture texts, we sing the same hymns, we share our offerings, and we pray with and for one another. We are learning to spin in the same direction.

We are building relationships that make God’s love real.

Christian love is a lot like “spooky action at a distance.” We hope that when we all go our separate ways and find ourselves facing our own unique life challenges, we will still be spinning in the same direction. We want to feel deeply connected, even when we are apart.

We are called into community to build relationships that make God’s love real. When we leave the sanctuary, we are transformed – so that your pain becomes my pain, and your joy becomes my joy.

In fact, everything we do in the church is designed to increase our quantum entanglement . Our Church Council priority this year is to build relationships that will bless, challenge and transform us.

That’s why we hold retreats. That’s why we have Midpoint and Prime Time. That’s why we form support groups for caregivers and parents. That’s why we have Bible study and Quest and FUSH and FUJI. That’s why we visit the sick and the homebound. That’s why we have Faith in Action teams for advocacy, global ministry, education, economic sustainability and housing justice.

God calls us into community to build relationships with other people.

Because the more our lives are entangled, inter-twined and inter-dependent, the more God's love abides in us. And the more God's love abides in us, the more power we have to create positive change in the world.

The only problem is that this form of quantum entanglement does not always have a long shelf life.

We may talk about love on Sunday morning, but we go home on Sunday night and vent our rage on the people who are closest to us.

We talk about love on Sunday morning, but we drive by a poor person on our way home and tell ourselves he is just a victim of a dysfunctional family.

We talk about love on Sunday morning, but when we are in a conversation during the week and someone puts down gays or uses a racial slur or calls a woman "bitch," we say nothing.

We talk about love on Sunday morning, but we complain about paying our taxes, and we ignore the state budget crisis, and we watch as Hull House in Chicago closes its doors.

1 John 3 was written for people like us. Because the way we treat one another, especially in the church, will either make God's love real . . . or it will make God's love disappear.

You see, the author of 1 John says, you can talk about Christian love all day long. But it only **becomes real** when you act on it, when you do something about it: when you lay down your life for another person; when you see a brother or sister in need and offer them help; when you get involved in deep relationships.

Stephen Colbert is a great spiritual teacher who has his own TV show on Comedy Central. He said: *If this is going to be a Christian nation that does not help the poor, either we have to pretend Jesus was just as selfish as we are, or we've got to acknowledge that he commanded us to love the poor and serve the needy without condition and then admit we just don't want to do it.*"

So what is the problem? Why is there this **gap** between what we say we believe about Christian love and what we actually **do** in our lives? The Apostle Paul understood this deep inner conflict, and he said:

"I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do the thing I want, but I do the very thing I hate." - Romans 7:15

I believe this gap exists because **we do not allow God's love to abide in us.**

Or maybe God's love is inside of us, abiding in us, but it has gotten buried under piles and piles of garbage.

Picture having a table at home, and on that table is a book that tells you that you are fearfully and wonderfully made by God. That book tells you that Jesus loved you so much that he laid down his life for you. That book tells you that the Holy Spirit is at work within you to forgive those who have wronged you and to help you live in peace.

Your name is written in that book. It is personally addressed to you. As a matter of fact, a copy of that book is given to every human being who ever lived. That book is all about God's love, which is the most potent, powerful force in the world.

But on top of that book of love, there is a stack of garbage. So when you go to find the book about love, you can't get to it.

There is a well-read 20-volume encyclopedia of anxiety on the table.

There is a huge book of photographs describing fears, both real and imagined.

There are volumes and volumes of diaries describing in detail every hurt you have ever endured, names included.

There are pages and pages of guilty confessions and lengthy descriptions of all the ways you have ever failed at anything in your life.

There are albums filled with hate for your enemies. On top of that are endless screeds of rage and frustration.

But you know, if you dig beneath all that anxiety, and fear, and hurt, and guilt, and rage, and frustrated desire, you will find that very precious thing: **love**. It is waiting to abide in you, to make its home in you.

If we search long enough, if we are willing to sort through all the garbage of those other feelings that lead us away from God and our true selves, we will find at the bottom: **love is**. (based on a quotation from Gerald May)

Love is not something we can generate ourselves. None of us has the power to create love by our own strength.

We can act with love only when we open our hearts to allow **God's love to abide in us, to be at home in us**. We have to look at all those other books on the table and sweep them out of the way, to make room for love. 1 John 3 is saying: **make space in the home of your heart for God's love to abide**.

Martha Sherman is a financial manager who has been pursuing a deeper spiritual life. She thinks a lot about how to act with unconditional love and to build relationships even during difficult encounters with others.

She has learned that beneath every human conflict is a desire to connect, to spin in the same direction.

So one day Martha was sitting in the stands at her son's high school football game. A dad was sitting behind her, and he spent the first three quarters of the game shouting angry, hateful words at the referees, coaches and players. Martha found it was almost physically painful to sit in front of this man. His yelling also made no difference, since the team was losing 21-0.

Martha wondered how she could be radically loving toward this really loud, obnoxious man. She tried to empathize with him, guessing that maybe he was lonely and just needed to let out his frustrations. She wanted to build a relationship.

But honestly, Martha was not feeling sympathetic enough to turn around and introduce herself to this guy, so she decided maybe she should just suffer in silence.

It was a total shock to her to find herself in the middle of the fourth quarter, standing up and ringing her team cowbell, screaming as loudly as she could, "We believe . . . we believe . . . we believe," the Red Sox chant from the 2004 season.

Four or five other moms stood up and began to chant with Martha, "We believe . . . we believe . . . we believe." And the angry dad finally shut up. Even more amazingly, the team was suddenly on a roll and scored 14 points in the last quarter!

In the end, Martha's team still lost. But the power of love scored a huge victory. Love inspired the team. Love calmed the voices of anger and frustration in the stands. Love made Martha oblivious to the fact that her hand was cut and bleeding from gripping and ringing the cowbell.

In the end, all Martha did was **pray to love this angry man**. All she did was to ask God's love to abide in her. She got her garbage out of the way and allowed God's love to take over. ("Practicing Love" from the Shalem Institute website, www.shalem.org)

The Dalai Lama was once asked, "What is the most important form of meditation we can practice?" His answer was simple: **Critical thinking, followed by action.**

We hear the same message in today's text: "*Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.*" (1 John 3:18)

God's love dies if all we do is think about it.

But we have the power to make **God's love real in the world when we act on it.**

We may not know how quantum entanglement works, but we know how it makes us feel. Amen.

Hymn: "There are Some Things I May Not Know (God is Real)

There are some things, I may not know.

There are some places I can't go.

But I am sure of this one thing: that God is real, for I can feel God deep within.

Yes, God is real, real in my soul.

Yes, God is real for God has washed and made me whole.

God's love for me is like pure gold,

Yes, God is real for I can feel love in my soul.

Amen.