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*1 John 3:16-24*

*We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our 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 him whenever our hearts condemn us; for God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything. Beloved, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have boldness before God; and we receive from him whatever we ask, because we obey his commandments and do what pleases him.*

*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. 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.*

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Back in 2022, when I was given the opportunity to choose where I would have my office, I was told I had two options. I could take the previous office used by at least the last two heads of staff, an office behind Jane’s desk in the main office. Or, I could use another office that was just slightly larger. The only thing to be aware of *this* office, I was told, was that it had two doors, one leading to the main office and the other opening up into the preschool hall. I was told to be aware that I chose that office, I would definitely hear the symphony of sound that accompanies any setting involving little humans.

Well, as most of you know, I chose the office that opens up to the preschool wing and I haven’t regretted it since. Sure, there are times when I’m at study and I hear a toddler throwing a tantrum, but I’m a parent of two toddlers so that doesn’t phase me the slightest. There are other times when I get to hear the laughter of children or their teachers. There are times when I hear the teachers encourage the kids, or console them when they cry, or help them when their struggling with tough things like sharing, respecting boundaries, and getting along with one another. Sometimes it makes me chuckle a bit when I’m alone in my office, because those are things that us adults struggle with as well! Which is why we are all the “little children” that John is speaking to in today’s passage.

“Little children,” he says, “let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.”

This is, of course, not a novel concept in the Bible. Jesus tells us to “love our neighbor as ourselves.” James tells us to not only be “hearers” of the word but “doers” of the word. Paul, in Galatians, tells us of the importance of “bearing one another’s burdens.” The Hebrew Scriptures are replete with examples of God instructing God’s people, the Israelites, to conduct themselves in a radical reorientation of hospitality, neighborliness, and mutual forbearance that stood in direct contrast to the winner-take-all mentality of Pharaoh’s economy. Yes, the Bible tells us over and over again to let our love not be mere words, but actions.

And that message is one that gets both preached and practiced every day at our preschool. As a parent of not one but two kids in the preschool, I’ve seen first-hand how much the teachers are dedicated to a culture of kindness, respect, and love. I see it when my office door is opened and the kids walk by and use their hands to say “love” in sign language. I see it when I pass them in the halls and they say “hey, Pastor Stephen,” or (as I’m probably better known, “hey, Winnie’s dad” or “hey, Hazel Grace’s dad.” I see it in the acts of kindness of the teachers. Having been born to two parents who were themselves educators, I have a soft spot in my heart for teachers of all kinds and the preschool staff we have here are second to none.

I remember this time last year when it was Hazel Grace and Winnie’s first few months being in school. With both of them COVID babies to one extent or another, this was the first time that they had ever really been exposed to a brand new germ “pool” and their poor little immune systems just didn’t know what to do with it. As many parents who have been in similar situations can attest, it’s not a fun place to be. Because those germs get brought home so the first few months of 2023 were pretty miserable for the Fearing family. Every week, it seemed, was a new adventure in a very non-fun game of “what new plague will our lovely daughters bring home with them this week?” I kid you not, we were *this* close to sacrificing a lamb and smearing its blood on the threshold of our home in desperation!

And then, one week, out of the blue, one of our girls’ teachers handed us a Tupperware dish after school with a casserole for our family. They handed it to us and said, “I get it’s hard and y’all must be exhausted. I hope in some small way that this helps lighten the load.” It’s those kind of gestures, above and beyond the “normal” call of duty, that set this preschool apart and is indicative, I think, of the wider dedication this great congregation has to showing up when the goes gets tough.

“Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.” The partnership between this congregation and the preschool is about sharing that message and we all have a part to play in that calling. This congregation has an important part to play to support this preschool, keep the teachers and kids safe, maintaining our building, and praying for the well-being of all who are blessed by its ministry. The parents, myself included among them, have a responsibility to support the preschool, respect the professionalism and qualifications of the staff, to support them through every dollar paid, every donut donated and caffeinated drink delivered. The staff has a responsibility to bring their best to their job, to express patience and understanding in chaotic moments, to love those kids and protect them at all costs (and, boy, do they do an outstanding job of all of those things!). And the staff of this church have a responsibility, too, to support the work of the preschool and to insure that the relationship between this church and the preschool continues to be a mutually-invigorating one.

And the kids have a responsibility, too. It’s their job to do the work of learning, growing, messing up and falling down, getting back up again and soaking it all in. And I’m so proud to be a part of a community that rises to the task of maintaining a healthy, safe atmosphere where that important work can happen.

The scripture Rebecca read for us today is clear in its mandate: love one another as Christ has loved us. Love the little child. Love the parent. Love the teacher. And let that love be as concrete as a hand sharing a toy, or a foot walking to help someone who has fallen, or an arm holding a child who is crying, or a Starbucks gift card for a teacher desperately needing a pick-me-up, or a casserole given in love to a young family at their wit’s end.

In the name of God the Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer, may all of us, God’s little children, say: **Amen.**