

## God's Love

Real: August 5, 2018

1 John 3:16

Welcome/intro/vision: welcome PBO!

On Thursday afternoon Steve Tamayo was minding his own business doing his job when the waters burst the retaining wall just behind our facility

Here are some pictures of the damage...

Grateful to everyone who came up from PBO to join us today! If you're typically a PBO attendee, raise your hand? Welcome!

If this is your first time worshiping with us here at Woods Charter, would you raise your hand?

PRAY for the situation

Great week to join us if you're new, we're starting a new series called Real, doing the work that we all need to do in our day and age to actually get to what's real.

We experience this challenge all the time and it was illustrated to me several years ago when some friends of ours went away on pretty exotic vacation with their kids

Their marriage was in a hard spot and they were trying to patch things back together

And on Facebook it sure LOOKED like they were having the time of their lives

But when they got back and shared with us what actually happened on that trip, it turned out it was a nightmare

things weren't being patched up, they were continuing to unravel and at some point in the not-so-distant future after that vacation, their marriage totally collapsed

But if you were just their friends on social media, the picture you got of them and their family was postcard perfect!

The kind of picture you'd see on your newsfeed and you'd immediately hate them deep in your heart for having it so good!

Reality is difficult sometimes to get a hold of—and the truth is that some of us hide from reality because we know that there are aspects of reality that are really hard and uncomfortable!

We don't want to have to deal with the realities of our medical condition, we don't want to have to deal with the realities of our finances, we don't want to have to deal with reality of our dysfunctional homes or upbringings

My own personal la-la land is way more to my liking than having to deal with reality!

And often those are very temporarily convenient for us, but here's the problem: **if we don't**

**relate rightly to reality we're really in trouble**

**because relating rightly to reality is the only way humans can be really alive.**

Underneath and amidst all of the spin and half-truths we see from other people and we tell about ourselves

I believe and the Scriptures teach that in all of our hearts there's this feeling that we were made for something actually wonderful and permanently real and we hunger for it

All of us have a hunger for and can imagine a better world—more real and more really wonderful world than this place.

Can you imagine a better world? Do you occasionally long for a world that isn't marked with cancers and violence and frustrations and discouragements and disappointments?

For every other hunger you have, there's a corresponding reality

You get thirsty, it shows you were made for water—water exists, it's the corresponding reality to your appetite for water

You get hungry, it shows you were made for food—food exists, it's the corresponding reality to your appetite for food

All of us have a hunger for a better world—maybe the reality is we were made for a better world and maybe the reality is that a better world exists

And maybe the invitation from Jesus is into

Right relating with reality right now so that we might become people whose lives over time match pitch with perfect, Ultimate Reality in preparation for eternity that is that wonderful, perfect place we all hunger for

There's a short letter in the New Testament by a man named John who is eager to help his first century readers and us map reality and live according to it.

And that's where we're going to camp out for the next few weeks throughout August so that our lives might start to match pitch with not only what is REAL but what is REALLY GOOD

And today we're just getting started with this series and getting things off the ground so we're going to tackle a very short little bit of John's letter

But we're going to start with one of John's favorite subjects: love.

And today we're going to fill in this blank: **"Real love looks like \_\_\_\_\_"**

And to help us, I've already showed you real love—**"Alex giving us chocolate"--ushers passing around Dove Chocolates—happy Sunday morning, you're welcome!**

I want you to unwrap your chocolate now and go ahead and eat if it you're into that sort of thing and we're going to let DOVE chocolates fill in this blank for us

and then on the wrapper Dove chocolates have these little quotes that very often tell us something of what their definition of love is

If your wrapper gives us anything that would be a picture of what love looks like or how we should express or experience love

would you please raise your hand and stand and read it out loud? *90-seconds back and forth with the crowd—maybe less?*

Some I found: **“Be your own valentine”**—self-love

**“Don’t settle for a spark, light a fire instead.”**

Here’s a good one illustrating our love for living in half-truths: **“Calories only exist if you count them.”**

What you find if you start really listening to all the pictures and explanations of what our culture thinks real love looks like is that some of them are very moving

But many of them end up self-destructive or empty or just kind of meaningless or contradictory

Turn on the radio or watch a movie and most of the pictures or descriptions of what they call love are either co-dependent or narcissistic.

It’s either “I can’t live without you: YOU COMPLETE ME!” or “I’m so awesome, you can’t live without me.”

We THINK we already know what real love looks like.

But when you’re swimming in an ocean that gives you all these mixed messages that we can’t help but absorb at some level, we’re going to end up pretty confused by the whole thing and love keeps falling apart on us over and over again

We go looking for love in all the wrong places because we do not have the right picture or definition of what REAL LOVE is supposed to look like

**John is going to** help us today map this crucial reality and fill in this crucial blank: “Real love looks like \_\_\_\_\_”

Bible/No Bible/1 John 3:16—just one verse today, here’s what he says about real love:

***16 This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters.***

This was a huge battle for the early church: as the ancient church was starting out, it was up against ancient Roman pagan culture that had a deeply entrenched framework of values

And ancient Roman culture did not have LOVE as the primary cardinal virtue—honor was more important, they would have talked about loyalty, too

The ancient Stoics would have talked about detachment altogether from the world of emotions

Love was in the cultural mix somewhere, but it wasn't the most important one.

Of course now in our culture in the west we presume that love is the most important virtue but we got that from Jesus and the Jesus-followers

Jesus is the one who took love from somewhere in the jumble of other virtues and moved it to the top of the heap

The ancient Greeks had a whole bunch of words for love:

there was brotherly love, there was friend love, there was romantic love, there was erotic love—all of those had their own word in ancient Greek

And as the early Christians were trying to find a word to put at the center of their movement, they looked at each of these words and realized that none of them quite fit

So they found this very seldom used word in the Greek called **agape**. It wasn't used very much and the usage was kind of vague.

So the early Christians took this ancient, seldom used word of agape and said "we're going to take this seldom used word, give it a new meaning and energy  
And then build our whole movement around this word"

So John's writing this letter and the word agape is all over the place, a seldom used kind of vague word for love in the ancient world

What does agape really mean? What kind of a love is John talking about? What kind of love is God about? If I lived by this agape, what would it look like for my life?

So John gives us his answer: This is what agape is, this is the picture of real love: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us.

This is a picture, not a definition, of what this word agape love is all about.

In creative writing they're always telling you to show don't tell: don't say the mountain is beautiful, describe a beautiful mountain and let the reader SEE that it's beautiful

Real love is wonderful and this is what it looks like: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us

Of course the Jesus story is just this: Jesus spends about 3 years teaching and performing miracles that seem to indicate that he was God's chosen Messiah

The messiah was the one who the Jewish people were expecting and hoping would come in like a warrior king to drive out the Romans and give Israel their land back and establish them as a global superpower

But after three years of looking an awful lot like the Messiah they were expecting, Jesus goes into Jerusalem knowing that there are people there who want to kill him

And while he's there in Jerusalem he's betrayed by one of his closest friends, arrested, goes through a mock trial and is executed on a cross

This kind of thing happened all the time in ancient Israel—all kinds of people claimed to be the Messiah or the one that would lead Israel to prominence and freedom from Rome

And time and time again, Rome would execute them and the whole movement would fizzle out

But the reason why John is writing to this church many years later and the reason why Christianity still exists 2,000 years later is that three days after he was executed Jesus was raised from the dead by God.

Nobody expected it, nobody was planning on it, but they experienced it, they witnessed it—the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus was a total surprise to the first disciples

This WAS their Messiah after all! Even if he hadn't done what they thought Messiah was going to come to do!

God had raised Jesus back to life after he was executed! That vindicated him as THE chosen one—he WAS the chosen and anointed one, even if it didn't fit their expectations

And so what they disciples end up having to do was going back and re-thinking all of their previous religious expectations and categories in light of what God had done in Jesus

**BEFORE RESURRECTION** here's what the disciples thought God was up to and going to do through the chosen one:

**Nationalistic warrior king**

**Israel as superpower**

**Disciples as head of state**

**After Resurrection** they had to re-think everything

**Jesus as self-giving sacrificial servant**

**They understood Jesus's death not as a tragic horrific end to their hopes but as a perfect sacrifice for our sins**

throughout their Jewish scriptures there were sacrifices of animals prescribed for the forgiveness of sins, they saw Jesus as that perfect sacrifice that took away our sins and reconciled us to a perfect God

They also talked about Jesus's self-giving sacrifice as **ransom or payment**, to buy us out of slavery to sin and death.

We were under the oppressive power of a tyrant that we couldn't defeat, but Jesus paid the price to purchase us away from that tyrant, to rescue us from a power we could never overcome on our own

Eventually: **Jesus was the messiah for ALL people, not just Israel** God did this unique thing by Jesus and through Jesus for everyone

If THIS is what Messiah is—this self-giving sacrifice for other people--then **DISCIPLES JOB: lay down their lives for let's put LOVE at the top of the heap of all the possible virtues!**

And what the first followers of Jesus then proceed to do as they're figuring all this out is they go around the ancient Mediterranean world and beyond inviting everyone into the same journey that they've been on themselves

They declare that Jesus was raised from the dead by God  
and if God has done this for this one man in all of history, then that was the key to understanding everything about God, about us, and about why we're here, what's gone wrong, and what God has done about it

To let the death and resurrection of Jesus re-shape all our understanding of life, death, what's good, what's expected, our categories and our values and our loves and our relationships and our work and what we're looking for in life—all of it

And the challenge and the invitation FOR ALL OF US is to engage in the same journey the first disciples did:

will you allow the resurrection of Jesus be the central turning point in your re-understanding of God, of yourself, and of the rest of the world?

And this re-shaping and re-making work is always happening for all of us who take Jesus seriously, it's a perpetual work in progress—not just a one-time event.

This Tuesday we're starting this seminar about how Christianity meets issues of race and racial healing

in large part because we believe that the death and resurrection of Jesus is the only power in the world that can bring about true reconciliation across these racial lines that are tearing our country apart

The church is uniquely equipped and positioned by virtue of what Jesus has done to bring power and wisdom to the issues of race and division in our country  
but by and large we are failing to do so

So we're going to tackle it together in this seminar, all of us taking our previous understanding about race and division and ethnicity and culture and difference

And asking Jesus to change us in light of the cross and the resurrection

And to empower us to be individuals AND a community of agape love—this love that reconciles us to God AND to each other across all typical fault lines of race, class, education, culture and more

THIS is real love, and this is how we KNOW what real love looks: **Jesus Christ *laid down his life for us***

The word choice there is very important. John doesn't just say that Jesus died, but that he laid down his life for us

There are a thousand little and small ways that you could lay your life down for others that don't look like a heroic saving act but are just as important

It's like the dad who declares that he would die for his kids but he won't ask them how their day at school was

Asking the kids how your day at school was and pausing to attend to their answers, that's a small picture of laying down of your life

The couple that I've been talking with over the past few months moving an ailing parent into a home and going to visit her over and over again even though she's getting to the point where she doesn't always recognize them, that's laying down your life

Hosting a small group in your home means you have to clean up the house or at least the living room every week! That's laying down your life

Volunteering with a non-profit organization that's putting a dent in the brokenness and sadness in this world, that's laying down your life

Financially giving sacrificially to the church and or to some other organization putting a dent in the darkness in the world, that's laying down your life

Speaking up against the mistreatment of a co-worker or family member or friend, even though it might ruffle the wrong feathers and put a little strain between you and others, that's laying down your life

And all of that is powerful, it's how this place which so falls short of what it could be, moves inch by inch from darkness towards the light

But as great and important as all those things are

No one has done this to a greater degree than Jesus

From the beginning, Christians have declared that Jesus was not just a great man or a great religious teacher

But the God of the universe putting on flesh. He existed before the beginning in perfect and eternal glory and peace

But he left all of that in order to put on flesh and go to work restoring a broken world

And so Jesus laid down all his former glory, his former power, his former place of eternal comfort and joy

To be born to a poor peasant couple in ancient Palestine 2,000 years ago—a step down so unfathomable that we'll probably never fully understand it, not even into eternity

and then he spends all his life continuing that trajectory: laying down his attention, his time, his energies, in service to others thousands and thousands of times before he laid down his life once and for all in Jerusalem

And so of course, John says, if this is how Messiah lived, this is how we need to live, too:

***<sup>16</sup> This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters.***

And THIS, my friends, is why we launched PBO about 18 months ago. Jesus draws near to us, and so we as his people are going to do whatever we can to draw near to others

We believe that the God of the universe loves every single man, woman and child in Chatham County

And we believe as a church that God has put us here to help them to know that.

And so we're going to do everything in our power that we can do to communicate God's great love to all the people all across Chatham

We believe Jesus is God drawing near to us. So 18 months ago or so we launched our Pittsboro campus.

We started with about 90-100 people, there, we've just about doubled since we launched—reaching more people with the great news of God's great love for them IN LARGE PART BECAUSE we didn't wait for them to come to us, we went to them, just like Jesus.

We believe Jesus is God drawing near to us, to speak our language.

And that's why right now we're working overtime on a building project right around the corner up here on Andrews Store road

Because for some people the fact that we meet in a school is a barrier or an obstacle to them coming hear to hear about God's enormous love for them in Jesus

So in a few months we're going to ask everyone to consider helping us as a church to remove barriers for people here in Chatham County to hear the good news of God's great love for them

by contributing towards a capital campaign for a building to serve here in Northern Chatham

We believe that God drew near to us, so we're continuing to pray and hope that in 2020 or just shortly after we might open up something in Siler City, we're still praying and thinking about what that might look like

Could be a Sunday morning service, could be a tutoring program or meeting some other need first to help us to build relationships in the community

But regardless, because Jesus Christ laid down his life for us and drew near to us, we're going to continually be asking the question "what can we do to follow in his footsteps?"

And so as much fun as it is for us to be together this week and as much as we love each other

We also have a real mission here as a church: to communicate God's enormous love to us in Christ to all our neighbors—and to do that, we've got to go to them

Going to them is what real love looks like. That's the life we want to live together as a community together.

It's this compelling account of Jesus that fills in the vacuum of what real love looks like. Real love looks like surrendering yourself for the sake of others

Some of us have seen or known or practiced an expression of faith where we go to church and it's like Vegas, what happens at church stays at church and then we leave and we live whatever way we like or feel like we need to

But then it doesn't impact anything else. It sort of stays theory or hypothetical and never actually becomes embodied in how we treat people

We'll talk more about this in the coming weeks, but the Scripture is relentless that since Jesus was embodied and since his sacrifice and his life wasn't just theory or an idea but real flesh, real blood, real life

Then if our own experience of faith isn't embodied as well then it's not real faith at all.

Faith must be embodied and expressed in how we treat our spouses, our kids, our friends, our co-workers, people who don't look like us, even our enemies

I had a great conversation a couple of weeks ago with someone who's been on a journey of considering Christianity that really illustrated this

She's been coming here to church for about two years but it's her first time as an adult engaging with Christianity and she doesn't have much of a church background at all

And she was coming to the Exploring Christianity seminar that we just wrapped up and we were talking about it over lunch

And she was explaining how during the course of the seminar she was engaged in a very, very difficult and complicated situation at work with an employee who works for her

And as she was describing to me all the Jerry Springer-like ways this employee was behaving and taking her and her company on a wild roller-coaster ride

But what really stood out to me was that as she was engaging with this situation while she was exploring Jesus

she was genuinely thinking about what it looked like to fire someone in a Jesus-way. It was awesome

It meant that she didn't say every mean thing she really wanted to say. It meant fighting to see this employee as someone God loved even as she made utterly stupid decisions over and over again

And having compassion on the employee and not just hating her for the stupid stuff she was doing

And ultimately it meant clear boundaries and firing her as gently and firmly as she possibly could

Here's someone who's starting her journey of faith and she's already recognizing that being a Christian requires embodiment, requires integration, requires laying her life down even for an employee that you need to fire

There is a Jesus way to fire someone, it's a way that honors and respects people while refusing to let their dysfunction over-run the situation

And it does require some laying down of our lives for the sake of someone who frankly doesn't always deserve it

But that's what the Jesus story is all about. That's what agape love looks like

The Jesus story is the picture of agape love because even though we didn't necessarily deserve it or even ask for it, Jesus laid down his life in exponential fashion for us

**And so this morning** as we're talking about filling in this blank: "Real love looks like \_\_\_\_\_"

**Your Take-WITH today is this:**

**What needs to change about what's in this blank?**

Because our culture has taken a Biblical value and told us that love is the most important thing, which is true and great and most of us here agree, that's what really matters

But then that same culture has totally butchered the biblical picture of love and fed us co-dependent or narcissistic pictures of what love is supposed to look like or feel like

Therefore you and I both have stuff in that blank that we've picked up from our co-dependent and narcissistic culture

And so we've both got expectations and definitions of love that are off, mis-shapen, unrealistic, unhealthy,  
maybe selfish on the one hand or enabling someone else's addictions or unhealth on the other hand

Our culture tells us that love's the most important thing—yes! But NO to the ways our culture wants to give us all the wrong definitions and distortions of what love really looks like

John here gives us a picture, a story, an account of what God has done to show us what real love looks like: Jesus laid down his life for us

That's how we know what love looks like

So this week there's an invitation to do a little weeding out in your understanding of love.

Because if you've got the right word and the right virtue as the main thing in your life  
but your definition of that virtue or your picture or understanding of what that virtue is or looks like is all distorted

it'll actually drive you FURTHER AWAY from God and the life he's made us to live, not closer

How do we know what God's perfect agape love looks like? This is how we know: Jesus laid his life down for us

And because our hearts and minds have a hard time getting a hold of this picture, Jesus left us a meal to celebrate, some tangible reminders of his incredible love for us

Which we'll celebrate today as we celebrate communion...

**PRAYER ROOM**