

Psalm 25:6-10

6 Be mindful of your mercy, O Lord, and of your steadfast love, for they have been from of old.

7 Do not remember the sins of my youth or my transgressions; according to your steadfast love remember me, for your goodness' sake, O Lord!

8 Good and upright is the Lord; therefore, He instructs sinners in the way.

9 He leads the humble in what is right, and teaches the humble His way.

10 All the paths of the Lord are steadfast love and faithfulness, for those who keep His covenant and His decrees.

What on earth are we here for? That's the question at the center of the sermon series we're starting today for the season of Lent. What on earth are we here for?

That's the question Pastor Rick Warren wanted to answer when he wrote ***40 Days of Community***, the devotional book we'll be working through over the next 40-some days as we prepare for Easter. And, it's a question that's bigger than just our reason for being here in worship on Sunday morning. In line with his best-selling Purpose Driven book series, Rick Warren's question – “What on earth are we here for?” – is a question of purpose. For what purpose has God created Christian communities and congregations – like East Woods? What are we meant to do and be *together* as brothers and sisters who bear Christ's name as a group?

Several years back, we created our **purpose statement or mission statement** as one way of answering that question for East Woods. Our Session discerned that we are a congregation called to celebrate Jesus by connecting with and caring for all people. Your Session and staff and I are accountable to that purpose statement to make sure that our work remains focused on those priorities. And, within our purpose statement, we can find reflections of the six biblical purposes Rick Warren identified for Christian communities in his work. Those six purposes are going to be the topics for **the six sermons** between now and Palm Sunday. They are: love, evangelism, fellowship, ministry, service, and worship. We really started the series this past Ash Wednesday by talking about confession. And, on Easter Sunday, I'm going to finish the series by adding one last purpose to our list, which is the priority of rising together with Christ in resurrection.

To some of you, it may seem like bumme timing to have a sermon series about community and togetherness when we're still in a global pandemic. Between legal restrictions and health concerns, we're still not able to be together in all of the ways many of us would like to be. But, in my mind, this is a perfect time to reset or reinforce our understanding of the biblical purposes of Christian community. As COVID counts continue to decline and as gathering opportunities start to increase again, we'll have our priorities straight. And, even now, we're beginning to build back our togetherness through in-person services and the great community groups that are being organized under Susan and Peggy and the Connection Commission.

Historically, there are lots of examples showing that the church can grow best and get strongest under restriction and hardship and persecution. So, let's not allow fear or restrictions to be an excuse or to get in the way of our togetherness. I happen to believe that God has a purpose in mind for this series on purposeful Christian community. And, I'm excited to engage these topics with you over the next 7 Sundays.

If you'll open your Bibles with me, our **2nd scripture reading** comes from the book of 1 John, toward the back of our New Testament (1,2,3 John; Jude; and then the Revelation). I'll be reading from Chapter 3 in verses 11-18. For this morning comes from 1 John 3:11-18. John the apostle wrote: ¹¹ For this is the message you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another. ¹² We must not be like Cain who was from the evil one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his own deeds were evil and his brother's righteous. ¹³ Do not be astonished, brothers and sisters, that the world hates you. ¹⁴ **We know that we have passed** from death to life because we love one another. Whoever does not love abides in death. ¹⁵ All who hate a brother or sister are murderers, and you know that murderers do not have eternal life abiding in them. 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. 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? ¹⁸ Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.

This is the word of the Lord for us on this 1st Sunday in Lent. Thanks be to God.

The opening section of 40 Days of Community matches the theme of the opening verse of John's message. John reminded us that, in Christian community, first and foremost, **we should love one another**. Strong community is built in an environment of strong love.

As Rick Warren wrote in our devotional, we're compelled to love one another because God loves us; because God commands it; because it's how we love God; because it shows we're saved; because we're a family; because it is practice for eternity; and because it is a witness to the world that God's love helps us love differently.

I really like the video we watched earlier because it showed many of the deep questions people may not ask directly but want to know internally. **Does God love me? Do I have value? Can you hear me? Do you see me? Can I trust you? Am I worth your time? Do you care?**

These aren't just questions people are asking outside of the church. Many of us came to the church and continue to come to this church asking the same questions. Does God love me, and will this group of people help make that love real to me? Do I have value in this community? When I offer my ideas, are they heard and respected? When I show up, am I truly seen and loved for who I am? Can I trust people in this congregation enough so that I can be real here about my struggles and faults? Am I worth your time so that you'll be there for me when I need you? Do you care enough to pray for me, notice if I'm not there, and follow up to help or encourage me, even if you're not a Deacon or Stephen Minister or staff member or pastor?

The bible reminds us that the way we answer those questions with one another in Christian community says a lot about how we're going to answer those questions for folks who don't yet share our commitment to Jesus. Community starts here, and we need to start with love. When it comes to community, **love is what matters most**.

That's the "what." What are we supposed to do? We're supposed to love one another. The video we watched asked the "how." **How can we love better, more like Jesus?**

And, I think the first part of knowing how to love better is understanding the "why." Why should we love one another? Before our 4-year old self can move forward to figuring something out, we have a nagging need to know why it's important.

Verse 16 of 1 John 3 gives us one answer.

John wrote, “We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for one another.” That brother or sister in the church family, regardless of how you feel about them, Jesus considered them so worthy of love and salvation that he gave his own life for their life. Are you better than Jesus? Is my life somehow worth more than Jesus’ life? Since the answer to both questions is no, we’d better be humble enough together to follow Jesus’ example.

Pastor Daniel Overdorf tells a story about a **young man in Haiti named Miltador**. Pastor Dan’s sister and brother in law served as missionaries in Haiti for 12 years, and during that time they had the privilege of helping Miltador learn the gospel and grow as a disciple.

Though Miltador was shy at first, he had a very soft and teachable heart, even when it came to some of the most challenging instructions in the Bible. Like most Haitians, Miltador was really poor, but he did have one possession that many Haitians did not. He owned a cow, which was something that gave Miltador's family an opportunity for ongoing nourishment from the cow's milk and ongoing income breeding the cow and selling its calves.

Miltador came into possession of the cow after several years of work. A local farmer hired Miltador, then just a boy, to take care of a calf. Each morning and evening Miltador retrieved the calf from the neighboring farm, found a place for it to graze, then returned it to its home. Miltador cared for the calf, with no pay, until it had grown and could be bred. When the farmer finally bred the cow, the farmer gave Miltador a calf--his only payment for years of work.

As this discipleship group, including Miltador, studied through the NT, they came upon 1 John 3:16-18. Paul, the man who led the study, struggled with whether to teach the passage. American Christians need this message; we typically think of Haitians as the ones who need help. Because the passage was in the Bible and because even the poor need to recognize the need to help others, he taught this passage.

The next week, when Miltador arrived at discipleship group meeting, Paul casually asked about his cow--was it healthy? Miltador hung his head, "I don't have the cow anymore," he confessed.

"What a tragedy? What happened to the cow?" asked Paul.

"My brother has been sick and needed to see a doctor," explained Miltador. "He had no money to pay a doctor. Last week you told us that if we have material possession, and see our brother in need, but don't help--how could the love of God be in us? So I sold the cow and gave the money to my brother so he could see the doctor."

That's great love. Isn't it? When we know what we're supposed to do – love one another – and we know why we should do it – because Jesus loved us through his own sacrifice – the how begins to be very practical. My brother or sister is in need. How will I show my love? I will give what I have to give to offer life to him or to her, even if it means less life for me.

Isn't that what John wrote in **verses 17-18 of our passage**? 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? ¹⁸ Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.

In 40 Days of Community, Rick Warren wrote: **"The influence of our congregations is not about attendance, or buildings, or programs.** Our influence within the greater community is based upon our love for one another. We make a statement about God by the way we love one another. It may be a positive statement or it may be a negative one, but the fact is people often form their opinions of God based upon our individual reputations: **'You may be the only picture of Jesus** people will ever see.' Or, they may form their opinion of God based upon the reputation of our congregations – how we get along, how we support each other, how we criticize, how we love one another." Rick Warren

In the New Testament Book of the Acts of the Apostles, we're shown a profound example of how sacrificial love in the church contributed to positive growth in the church.

In Acts 2 at verse 44, Luke wrote, "All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved."

Within the past couple of weeks, I've been reminded of some great examples of this within our congregation. First in my own life, as I use my laptop computer for just about everything I do, I'm reminded of a very generous couple who, years ago, asked me if I needed anything to be able to do my job better. When I mentioned my aging laptop, they just told me to get the computer I needed and they covered the cost. Very simple, incredibly generous act of love. And, I hope that you experience the blessings as ripple effects of their generosity through the ministry work I do day in and day out.

Similarly, we have at least one incredibly generous and trusting individual in the congregation who has been restricted by COVID from annual travel opportunities. Seeing that the money usually spent on that travel wasn't needed this past year, this wonderful church member has offered it for me to distribute at my discretion to any who have need. And there has been need. So it has been a tremendous blessing to me to be able to extend financial support as I've become aware of some opportunities.

These are just a couple of examples, and I know that many of you are living examples of that kind of sacrificial love regularly with your time and talent and treasure. Though we are small, I believe the presence of God is often felt deeply among us because of that love.

But again, the question from the video: **“How can we love better?”** Because, we can always love better. Can't we?

The tradition of each Lenten season provides us an opportunity to give up something that's not life-giving for us or add something that we believe will be life-giving for us. So, since many of us often live right at the boundary of busyness, is there something good you might give up that could be replaced for a season by something better, something that might help build the loving Christian community of East Woods Presbyterian Church? Maybe it will begin with a sacrifice of comfort to get out of the COVID routine and safety net a bit.

Lent could be a great time to **start coming back to the church campus** for Sunday morning services or other gatherings. Our presence with one another is an irreplaceable source of love and community together. So, for those of you who are still joining us online, is it possible for you to come back yet?

If there are good reasons why the answer is ‘no,’ then know you have my blessing and the blessing of the congregation to continue being a virtual presence. But, if your reasons are really more about comfort or fear or routine, I want to challenge you to step out – literally and figuratively – to be fully present with your church family again.

Maybe Lent will be the time to **jump in with one of the Community Groups** that are forming. On both the home page and events page of our website, Gwen Wagner and Peggy McNees have done a fantastic job giving descriptions of the various groups and how to join them. If you don’t see one you want, maybe you’ll feel inspired to start and lead one.

I’ve recently discovered again that **servicing with someone else** can be a great way to start or strengthen a relationship. A little less than 2 weeks ago, Darryl Eddy and I teamed up to cover the evening shift at the Sumner House in Camas for Family Promise of Clark County. I’ve been wanting to get to know Darryl better for a while, and the Family Promise time together confirmed for me that he’s as fantastic and interesting as I suspected. Plus, we got to help East Woods fulfill our commitment to Family Promise and heard some really encouraging words of appreciation from some of the Family Promise residents. Win-Win-Win! I think a few other East Woods folks had similar experiences this month, and another Family Promise hosting week is on its way in April. Maybe this season will give you a chance to invite someone in the church you’ve been wanting to get to know better to serve with you through a Mission Commission opportunity or some other avenue of service in the life of the church.

One final story for this sermon: Samuel Bradburn, an associate of John Wesley, was highly respected by his friends and used by God as an effective preacher. On one occasion he was in desperate financial need. When Wesley learned of his circumstances, he sent him the following letter: "Dear Sammy: ‘trust in the Lord, and do good; so shalt thou dwell in the land, and verily thou shalt be fed.’ Yours affectionately, John Wesley." Attached to the letter was a 5-pound note (equivalent to \$200).

Bradburn’s reply was prompt. "Rev. and Dear Sir: I have often been struck with the beauty of the passage of Scripture quoted in your letter, but I must confess that I never saw such a useful ‘expository note’ on it before."

You know what matters most in community? Love – personal, practical, sacrificial love. The kind of love that proves that we are people together following the example of the Lord who loved us first – personally, practically, sacrificially, perfectly. Let's choose to love like that. Let's ask God to lead us.