

Emmanuel Ev. Lutheran Church – Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod

Easter 5

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Sermon by Pastor Gary A. Pufahl

Life in Jesus leads to love for one another!

—1 John 3:18-24

We have a natural tendency to do a lot of comparisons in our lives. Have you found that to be true? You go to the grocery store, and you compare products on the shelves. Do you buy the brand name or the generic? It depends. You make some comparisons. What usually prompts me to buy one product over the other is cost, but not always. We make comparisons with our school. What do we offer that other schools do not? What are we missing that other schools have? Parents make those comparisons quite a bit when they are looking for a school for their children. We do that with our church. We compare various ministries that we have here at Emmanuel with ministries in other congregations. We compare how warm and welcoming we are compared to other churches. We compare our music and worship and sermons and doctrines and so many other things. Just take note sometime of how often we make comparisons in our lives. Some comparisons are good. It may save us money or prompt us to do things better. Some comparisons are not good. It may make us jealous and envious and maybe even bitter toward others.

Sometimes I hear about comparisons we make with the people of the world. Oh, it's true that there is definitely a cold darkness that is blanketing many people in our world. In fact, Jesus once said, "The love of most will grow cold" (Matthew 24:12). Have you noticed that to be true in your life? You drive down the road and someone gives you some unwelcomed sign-language. You don't know what prompted that. You see two cars pulled over on the side of the road. The drivers are hanging out their windows screaming at each other with language that would make the devil blush. Gun shots are heard in the neighborhood because somebody did not get his way. And maybe those are things that you have seen just this past week. I know exactly what Jesus means. "The love of most will grow cold." I can see it as I look around. I can feel the chill that emits from so many people in our world. There is the chilly darkness that seems to be coming over so many people. And it's easy for me to make a comparison. "I'm not that bad. How can they act like that? Why do they do things like that? I would never do that." And maybe you are right. Maybe you have never committed road rage; maybe you have never yelled at someone with profanity; maybe you have never fired a gun in anger.

But before we make the comparison with others and prop ourselves on a higher pedestal, we should really look deep inside. You see, God does want us to make a comparison. But it's not with other people. He wants us to compare our lives to him. How do we match up in that comparison? Jesus summarized God's law very clearly, didn't he? "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul and all your mind and all your strength. And love your neighbor as yourself" (Luke 10:27). We know those words. We know that's what God wants. He wants every fiber of our being to be done out of love for our God. He wants us to willfully and deliberately do what is in the best interest of anybody to whom we can be a neighbor. He wants that all the time. So how do you compare when it comes to love? How many times don't we say it and maybe even preach it, "Love your neighbor"? But do we always live it? It's easy to gather here together and use our lips to sing God's praise, but do we always show it in the world? John writes, "Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth" (1 John 3:18). But how often do we get so consumed with our own lives that we don't know our neighbor's name, much less his needs? How often have we seen someone who could use a gesture of love, but we were too busy to go out of our way for that person?

I don't know about you, but I look at my own life and wrestle with this. I struggle. I have a sinful, selfish nature that wants to quickly close the door on people so that I don't have to put myself out there for the sake of others. Oh, I could stand before you and say, "Ah, but at least I'm not as bad as most." But that's not the right comparison. As I compare my life to God's law, I hang my head in shame because my conscience condemns me. I hear the voice of my conscience because I hear the voice of God's thunderous law *written* on my conscience, "Guilty. Guilty. Guilty."

My friends, the apostle John has a lot to say about this today. John has been around for a while. He has seen many different facets of life. He's pretty experienced to talk about the reality of life. And a few verses before the words of our text, this is what John says, "Anyone who does not do what is right is not God's child" (1 John 3:10). Ouch! "Anyone who does not do what is right is not God's child." Well, then, God must cut me out of the will. How

can I possibly say that I am God's child when I don't do what is right? How can I call myself a Christian, when I have fallen short of what God wants of me? And my heart condemns me. My heart condemns me. God's law that is written on my heart condemns me.

But look at this comparison. John says, "This is how we know that we belong to the truth and how we set our hearts at rest in his presence: If our hearts condemn us, we know that God is *greater* than our hearts, and he knows everything" (1 John 3:19,20). "God is greater than our hearts." You see, even though our conscience and our emotions and our hearts are blessings from God, they aren't always reliable. How I feel about any given situation is not my reliable source of reality.

Oh, don't misunderstand me. Our emotions are not evil. They're not. Our emotions can be a blessing from God. We see people expressing many emotions in the Bible. Jeremiah weeps. Solomon swoons. David dances. Enjoy the spontaneous laughter. Embrace the sadness over sin. Erupt with joy in song. But just remember that when all is said and done, feelings are not the final word. God's truth is the final word. The good news of Jesus is the final word. "He is greater than our hearts." We teach our children about this at an early age. We sing "Jesus loves me this I know for the Bible tells me so." We don't sing "Jesus loves me this I know for my feelings tell me so." No. We stand on something more reliable than our emotions and feelings. "If our hearts condemn us, we know that God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything" (1 John 3:20).

God knows everything. He knows the times when I have closed the door on a relationship. He knows the times when I have been absorbed by my own selfish, sinful desires. He knows the times when I have spoken great words but did not follow through with actions. And God knows how that rips our hearts to shred. He knows how it bothers us when we have not loved and we hear the words "guilty, guilty, guilty" echoing in our conscience. God knows all that. He knows everything. And he also knows that is the very reason he sent his Son. This is why Jesus came to offer his life on a cross. He came to stand between us and the holy anger of God and willingly took all of God's wrath and anger away from us and onto Jesus. He boldly proclaimed from the cross, "It is finished" (John 19:30). Your sins are paid for. And he proved it by rising from the dead shouting that truth throughout the ages. God is greater than your heart.

Whenever your heart condemns you, lift your eyes to see what Jesus has done. He took that blame and shame, and he buried them in that tomb. My sins are buried with Christ, and that is where they are going to stay. Christ has cleared me. He has cleared you. "If our hearts condemn us, we know that God is greater than our hearts" (1 John 3:20). And they can condemn us no longer because Jesus has cleared our hearts.

So John continues. "Dear friends, if our hearts do not condemn us (and they wouldn't because we have life with Jesus), we have confidence before God and receive from him anything we ask..." (1 John 3:21,22). Most translations have "whatever we ask..." I love the indefinite pronoun. God has opened the door to heaven so that you and I can approach him with confidence, not fear, not doubt, but with confidence. And we can confidently know that we will receive from him *whatever* we ask. Do the next words strike you? If you ask the question, "Why?" what answer would you get? Oh, we know that the reason we can approach God is because we have life with Jesus, right? We can approach God's throne because of his grace. We know that God answers our prayers because of his love and mercy. So do John's words strike you as being a little odd? "Dear friends, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have confidence before God and receive from him anything we ask because we keep his commands and do what please him" (1 John 3:21,22). Whoa! Wait a second. That's the reason why I have confidence to approach God and receive from him whatever I ask? What in the world does John mean by this? Well, if John stopped here, we might come to a very wrong conclusion.

So thank God he didn't stop. John doesn't leave us to our own interpretation of those words. What is God's command? Is he talking about the 10 Commandments? Well, in the very next words, he tells us, "And this is his command: to believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and to love one another as he commanded us" (1 John 3:21). Jesus talked about this in our Gospel for today. How can we love one another in our lives? How can we produce fruits in our lives? The only way is to be connected to the vine. Jesus says, "I am the vine; you are the branches.... No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me" (John 15:5,4) Jesus is the only one who is able to keep God's commands. He is the only one who can love God with all his heart, soul, mind, and strength. He is the only one who can love our neighbor with a perfect love. And he did all that for you. He loved perfectly, and he has credited that perfect life to you. If we are connected to Christ, then his life becomes our life. So how are we connected to Christ? How are we as branches

grafted into the vine of Christ? How does his life become our life so that we can produce fruits of love? And the answer is faith. We are connected to Jesus through faith. We believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ.

Ah, but we might be inclined to think to ourselves, "Well, I need to do the believing. Faith must be something I do." It's almost as if John anticipated that thought. Look at what he says, "Those who keep (God's) commands lives in him (in Jesus), and he (Jesus) in them. And this is how we know that he lives in us: We know it by the Spirit he gave us" (1 John 3:24). We are the recipients of the Spirit's work, not the doers. This is how I know that I have life. This is how I know that I am connected to Jesus, the vine. I didn't choose Jesus. He chose me. And the Holy Spirit has given me the faith to trust everything that Jesus has done for me.

And my friends, that totally frees you to love. How so? Let me ask you a question: What keeps you from loving other people? Oh, there's probably a lot of different ways to answer that question. We have fear. Fear of being rejected. Fear of being judged. Maybe our selfishness gets a hold of us. We don't want to put ourselves out there for the sake of someone else. It's a lot of effort. It can be draining. Do you see why I say that when we are connected to Christ because of what *he* has done for us that that frees us to love? Whom do I have to fear? Jesus lives in me and I in him. My selfish, sinful nature is not my master. That sinful nature was buried with Christ. That's where my sins lie. I have a new life with Christ. My heart does not dictate if I am right with God or not. Jesus dictates that by his life, death, and resurrection. And the Holy Spirit has connected me to Christ through faith. Why do I feel as though I need to compare myself to others in order to pat myself on my back? Jesus has my back, and he has already invited me into his presence now and forever.

What is there left for me to do? I am set free to love. You and I know that the world is growing darker and darker. Jesus did say, "The love of most will grow cold." But not here. Not with us. I pray not with us ever. With a chilly darkness that is growing in our world, it is critical for God's people to be a warm light. Jesus and John tell us that is reality. You see, life in Jesus leads to love for one another. Amen.