

Word, Speech, Deed, Truth

I John 3:16-24

Easter 4B

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Who here has studied a language besides English? Like many of you I've studied French and Spanish. French is very useful if you cross the border into Canada. But to become a Presbyterian minister, I also had to study Greek. Do you know why? It's because the New Testament was written in Greek. To understand the message better, the Presbyterian Church believes that it's best to know the original language of scripture.

In case you're curious, here is today's key verse in Greek, from the First Letter of John, chapter three, verse eighteen: ***Teknia, may agapomen logo mayday tay glossay alla en ergo kye alaytheia.*** [I John 3:18, The Greek New Testament]

Have you ever argued with someone about your faith? It happens sometimes. A man named John wrote a letter to his friends because they were arguing about Jesus ... old arguments that we don't hear so much anymore, about whether Jesus was mostly human or mostly God. But the arguments were so serious that their church was close to splitting apart. John encouraged his friends to remember that God's love is a special gift to be shared, not to be used as a point of argument and division. If the love disappears, all we are left with is fighting.

There are many different translations of this verse in English. The reason that there are so many is that even expert translators come to different conclusions about the best way to translate. I actually enjoy comparing these translations to enlarge my understanding.

Here is our verse in the Pulpit Bible, the Revised Standard Version: ***"Little children, let us not love in word or speech, but in deed and in truth."*** [I John 3:18, RSV]

Love is best demonstrated by deeds. Its truth is best shown by actions. It sure seems like a simple lesson. But I have seen us fail to live by it too many times. When I was in high school on every Sunday the people in my church listened to prayers for peace and harmony in the world, but many of them were glad that black families had been blocked from moving into their neighborhoods. I'm not making this, many of them came right out and said so if you asked them. It's not enough to say you love someone, you have to show it by the deeds you do. It's not enough to intend something, you have to back it up by your actions. The love is only true if it is shown by deeds. Without the deeds to demonstrate it,

the love disappears. That's why the Mission Committee is challenging us to take hunger more seriously.

Here's another translation of our verse from the Good News version: ***"My children! Our love should not be just words and talk; it must be true love, which shows itself in action."*** [I John 3:18, TEV]

True love ... I remember sitting with the guys at the cafeteria table during my first year of college. My friend George was carefully watching all of the girls waiting to pass through the serving line. "Do you see that girl with the black hair ... I'm in love!" Here was our not so sympathetic response: "Yeah, what are you going to do about it? Go on, go up and talk to her". He couldn't work up the nerve. The Good News version says that true love shows itself in action. (Don't worry, eventually George did find his true love!). But the point is that without action to back it up, the love disappears.

Here's another translation, from the New English Bible translation: ***"My children, love must not be a matter of words or talk; it must be genuine, and show itself in action."*** [I John 3:18, NEB]

The word that stands out in this translation is "genuine". I remember hearing about a radio faith healer who promised that any listener who sent him five dollars would receive a "gen-you-wine" autographed photograph of Jesus. I wonder how many listeners were fooled into thinking that there could be a photograph of Jesus who lived about 1,800 years before the first camera? "Genuine" is a word that reflects integrity. Our words and deeds must reflect something genuine, in the ways we live and work. It's not easy to be genuine in our love and actions. Our Presbyterian magazine, Presbyterians Today once had a series of articles exploring the difficulty of being a Christian in the business world. It's not easy being genuine. But if the love isn't genuine, it disappears.

Here's another translation, from the J.B. Phillips translation: ***"My children, let us love not merely in theory or in words - let us love in sincerity and practice."*** [I John 3:18, Phillips]

The word that catches our attention here is "sincerity". I often sign letters with the common phrase "sincerely yours". I do it as a formality, usually without thinking, but the word "sincerity" should mean that the words I've written come right from my heart, with honesty and truth, without selfish calculation or greedy manipulation.

When we invited people to come forward to express their faith in becoming new members we ask a series of questions. It could be easy to answer each question with a simple "yes", but we are looking for a sincere expression of faith, something from the heart that expresses our desire to do the deeds of faith. Because without sincerity, the love disappears.

And this leads to the next translation, from the Jerusalem Bible: ***"My children, our love is not to be just words or mere talk, but something real and active"*** [I John 3:18, Jerusalem]

The key word in this one is the word "real". What John wants to tell us about God is not mythical, or made up, or fiction. Love that's real is something with power in this world, enough power to bring people together, enough power to overcome argument and division, enough power to give hope to even the most lost or desperate people. Because if the love is not real, it just disappears. And that would be a tragedy, because we don't want God's love to disappear, we want it to flourish and grow, to bring hope, joy, wonder and delight to everyone everywhere ... in our families, in our church, in our town ... everyone and everywhere.

And now this final translation, from The Message: ***"My dear children, let's not just talk about love, let's practice real love."*** [I John 3:16, The Message]

This translation uses the word "real", like the previous one, but it introduces a new concept: practice. Love is something that we practice. No one expects us to be experts, but we learn about love best by doing it, learning from our mistakes, building on our successes. It may be that the best way to understand a church is that it is a place where we practice being Christians

Words and talk, love and action. These words were written by a man named John a very long time ago. He wrote them in Greek, because that was the language that the most people in that part of the world understood best. He wrote his letter to bring divided people back together, and that is a message that makes sense in Greek and in English.

Are we divided people? You might not know it in the life of this church, but there are divisions everywhere, between Christians with different views, between rich and poor, between races and nationalities, between men and women, between young and old, between urban and rural, between conservatives and liberals. There is no question that there are divisions in the world, but we can be among the faithful few

that have set their goal on overcoming these divisions. *"My children! Our love should not be just words and talk; it must be true love, which shows itself in action."* [I John 3:18, TEV]

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