



Roanoke, Virginia

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## *“From Death to Life”*

*1 John 3:11-18*

**Jen Brothers**

<sup>11</sup> For this is the message you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another. <sup>12</sup> 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. <sup>13</sup> Do not be astonished, brothers and sisters, that the world hates you. <sup>14</sup> **We know that we have passed from death to life because we love one another.** Whoever does not love abides in death. <sup>15</sup> All who hate a brother or sister are murderers, and you know that murderers do not have eternal life abiding in them. <sup>16</sup> We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. <sup>17</sup> 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?

<sup>18</sup> Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.

“The coronavirus is reaching terrifying new levels in the United States,” is the headline in my daily news briefing. I need a sign that your kingdom is coming, Lord.

Political polarization among Americans in the past 40 years has outpaced the political division among other democracies, researchers conclude in a 2020 study. And I only need to consider what I can and cannot talk about with family and friends to feel the sting of this statement. I need the hope of reconciliation, Lord.

“We can't breathe,” The Rev. Dr. William Lee said in a livestream conversation on racism in America. “When you live in a country that refuses to have universal healthcare, we can't breathe,” he said. “When you work in McDonalds, Burger King, and Hardees, and you have no leave, your



child gets sick at school, there's no sick childcare—if you leave work and go take care of your child the chance that your job is not going to be there when you go back, you can't breathe," he said. "We were having a hard time breathing, and so we saw, with George Floyd not being able to breathe, a collective sense for a lot of Black people, we are having a hard time breathing in America," he told us. I need to see resurrection, Lord. I need a sign I can hang my hat on. Because I'm surrounded by death. Death of the body, death of relationships, death of the dream of a country where everyone can equally breathe.

But from this ancient letter a voice calls to us, *listen—we don't have to wait on proof that God's kingdom is coming. The key to eternal life—the evidence that death will not have the last word, can be seen right here, right now, if we don't stand in the way of it. We will be the proof of God's new creation if we choose to love one another with the same love God has given us. We know that we have crossed over from death to life, this text proclaims, because we love one another.*

1 John is a message for a community in conflict. There is some sort of disagreement in this church, probably concerning whether Jesus was both fully human and fully divine. People are divided against each other. Relationships are dying. Lines are being drawn and choices are being made that will significantly impact the future of this community. At the heart of the section I just read, the writer is calling everyone to love one other in concrete, actionable, self-sacrificing ways. This call to love in truth and action isn't new to them, just like it isn't new to us. "This is the message you have heard from the beginning," the writer says. *You already know this—we are to love one another as Jesus has loved us, even when we disagree, even when we fear schism, even when we feel like our neighbor is against us. The love Jesus has shown us is always your goal. When you practice this love, you have eternal life abiding in you.*

Oh, but it is difficult to love those who challenge us. If it weren't so hard, the writer of this text would not have to mention it. It goes against all instinct to love someone whom we see as a threat to our family, our community, or our sense of self. When someone is on the opposite side of the aisle, lives on the opposite side of the tracks, or tries to pull us in the opposite direction of where we want to go, love is rarely our first, second, or third response. I'm convinced Jesus knew this, or he wouldn't have added love your neighbor as yourself to the great commandment. He wouldn't have named love as the hallmark of his disciples unless he was calling us to practice a love unique to him. Love that stands in stark contrast to the ways of the world. Love we cannot access without divine help. Loving those who love us is easy. Loving those who want to be loved by us, easier still. But when loving others requires us to sacrifice our traditions, change the way we have made sense of the world thus far, or see ourselves in a less-than-favorable light, that's tough. We have these instructions because this love goes against the grain of our culture and our basic survival instincts. This love takes work.

But Jesus and this letter's author don't call us to this love simply because it is difficult. We don't have these instructions to make us feel bad when we miss the mark, or to somehow prove our worth as Christians when we succeed. This call to love with Jesus' love has never been about collecting merits or demerits on our spiritual report cards. It's about making the passage from



spiritual death to living eternally with God, here and now. It's about manifesting tangible evidence of the resurrection power that was unleashed upon this world when Jesus died and rose again. What this writer is trying to tell us is that when we love others as Jesus has loved us, we live into the fullness of Christ's resurrection. We don't have to wait until we physically transition from death to eternal life—eternal life begins when we allow Christ's love for us to flow through us.

It is worth noting what this death-defying love that brings heaven crashing into earth looks like, and our writer spells it out. This love is not a feeling, and it is not primarily expressed in words. It brings freedom to those who encounter it. The best example we have is Jesus' own act of laying down his life for ours. It is agape love—a love that doesn't look to protect itself, but instead, surrenders to the well-being of others, even at its own expense. It is God's love for us. It is Jesus' love for us. It flows into us through the Spirit. We are soaked in this love. Because we know this love, because we claim it for ourselves, we are to share it with others through actions that bear witness to the hope we proclaim: God's kingdom is coming. One day, it will be fully here. When it is, death will be no more. Enemies will be friends. Everyone will have what they need. Love will rule all hearts. All that is broken will be restored. Everyone and everything will be made whole.

Loving others through action that bears witness to this truth is especially challenging right now. Our well-worn avenues for loving and being loved—eating and drinking, parties, weddings, and travel—have all been cut off. In this season of pandemic, loving others looks like the opposite of what we would normally do. Social distancing, mask-wearing, cancelling programs—none of these actions come naturally to us, but we curb our behaviors to save the lives of those who are most vulnerable to this disease. It's hard to curb our behavior for the sake of others, especially those we don't even know, but loving others as Christ has loved us requires putting the welfare of others above our own. That's what Jesus did, put our welfare above his own. And God wrought a miracle through that exchange. Resurrection.

During this summer of pandemic, we are also being asked to practice sacrificial love in ways that are even more challenging than mask-wearing and social distancing to preserve lives. The deaths of Ahmaud Aubrey, Brionna Taylor, and George Floyd, have forced many of us (and by us, I mean white Christians) to see what we have denied or ignored for too long—the pervasive existence of racial inequality in America. So now during this season of pandemic, many of us are doing the difficult work of listening to the voices of Black people through our church's 21-Day Racial Justice Challenge. As we read, follow the news, march, and talk more about racism, we are learning that the deck remains stacked against a whole group of people in ways we hadn't realized. We are being told that this system helps white people at the expense of others. These are difficult words to hear. They are painful to absorb. It's natural to want to dismiss them. But this is not what love does. Love listens. Love is pained by the pain of another. Love shifts to accommodate another's needs. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

It is not enough for Christians to profess to love others in word only, just as it would never have been enough for God to just say to us, *I love you*. No, the power in God's love is that it became action. It took on flesh and bone. It walked and talked. It healed bodies and exorcised demons. It



challenged authorities, overturned systems, fed the hungry, and widened the circle so all would be welcome. This kind of love creates conflict. The love we know through Jesus is not this world's norm. When we practice it, there will be push-back. But don't misinterpret the push-back for failure. Something miraculous happens when we love as Christ loved. When we put the welfare of others above our own need to be right, or comfortable, or in charge, the power of the resurrection becomes manifest. Here, now, on this side of the veil, the forces in opposition to God's kingdom are overthrown and heaven's on-earth-border grows.

Every day we have the chance to move from death to life. It is as simple, and as difficult, as moving from hate to love. To choose anything but love is to choose to remain in death. The love we are called to cannot be fulfilled through words or song. This love is self-sacrificial action sourced from the miracle of Christ's resurrection, and it is available to us at home, in our relationships, and in the most intractable problems we face. The good news is that we are not being asked to share something we have not already received. God will not ask us to do what God has not already done for us. Christ's love has been poured out upon us. It is in us. May this boundless, healing, redeeming love become action that moves us and all of creation from death to life. Amen.

