



**1 John 3:16-24; John 10:11-18**  
**Reverend Giuseppe Mattei (April 21, 2024)**

The apostle John says something like this: “Let’s get something straight: love is known in truth and action and not in words or great speeches.”

There is much said about “loving people” in the Bible. Here, John wants us to focus on “loving our fellow believers.”

I can’t say I am a believer and at the same time ignore those I can’t stand, talk evil about them, use them, hate, and fight them.

In a way, John is repeating Jesus’ affirmation of the distinctive feature of a genuine community of disciples: People will know us by our love for one another.<sup>1</sup>

Believing in the name of Jesus and loving one another is one and the same. This means fulfilling the commandment (see 1 Jn 3:23). The unity we share with Christ impels us to love as Jesus did: this is how Jesus abides in us, and his Spirit animates us.

We might be able to follow his commandments and fulfil them, but if it is not his Spirit stirring our hearts and moving us to action then whatever work of piety we do is in vain, and we are fooling ourselves (Psalm 127; Isaiah 47:10). Human efforts are futile without God's help, inspiration, and protection.

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<sup>1</sup> See John 13:35.

Show real love and not *make-believe love*. Love without pretense is a constant reminder in the Church.

[Paul spoke about real love in the attempt of encouraging genuineness: “Don’t just pretend to love others. Really love them. Hate what is wrong. Hold tightly to what is good. Love each other with genuine affection and take delight in honoring each other.” (Romans 12:9-10. See also Galatians 6:7)]

And James, the brother of our Lord, comments: We “must be doers of the word and not merely hearers.” (James 1:16 and 26)]

Sometimes, our foolishness gets the best of us, and all we can do is to shake our head at our stubbornness: Why do we work hard on our *appearance of goodness* and seek *people’s praises* and *human glory*? Why would we bother to look good in the eyes of mere mortals and not of God? Is this a sign that God’s love is not in us? A sign that we aren’t there yet? Pretentious love is calculated love.

If our intent is to appear nice and pious, if all we do is check another box, then our religion is just *going through the motions*, a religion lived out of our head and not out of a generous heart. When we decide to live in our heads only, we become isolated from the God who is closer than our next breath.

This kind of religion is unfulfilling and missing the point. God cannot be bought with our *clever negotiations*, our *giving-for-the-purpose-of-receiving sacrifices* and won’t be fooled by our *niceties*. Our attempts at looking acceptable and lovable to God are unnecessary, and spiritually insufficient and inappropriate.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Isaiah 1:11-17

God does not wait for us to be ready to shower us with blessings just as the rain is not constrained by the soil's preparedness to be refreshed.<sup>3</sup> God's grace is all around us: can we see it?

But we don't start out that way. We have a *genuine interest* in knowing the Lord and back in time we felt the *spark* that got us excited and in love with God and the Church. Perhaps we feel *melancholy* for the times we felt closer to God and don't really know how to revive the fire. Is there longing to feel alive again?

Or, perhaps, we want to be faithful and yet have a hard time loving *difficult people*. We don't want to pretend to love but we don't know how: our heart is not fully into it and our smile is forced. I've found myself in that situation sometimes. Was I pretending to love? Was I forcing myself to love? Was it evident in my body language, in my half-baked smile?

What God is interested in is a *humble heart*,<sup>4</sup> a heart ready to acknowledge that we already have what we need. God is a generous Provider and is ready to give abundantly but desires for us to take the initiative and ask.<sup>5</sup> What's our attitude?

“The Lord is my Shepherd, there is nothing I shall want.”

I guess God wants us to reflect on what it is that we are asking: Is it a *need* or is it a *want*?

I describe a “*want*” as the cherry on the top of the cake of life, whatever is above and beyond the needs of life. A “*need*,” on the other hand, is part of the necessities of life, whatever is needed

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<sup>3</sup> Matthew 5:45.

<sup>4</sup> Psalm 25:9; 51:17; Zephaniah 2:3.

<sup>5</sup> John 16:23-24; Luke 11:9-13

to sustain life. The “wants” are the surplus. The “needs” are the structure of life, what makes life “life.”

While there is a long list of “wants,” “needs” amount to the basics: food, love, care, shelter, safety, trust, justice, freedom, a bill-paying job, dignity, and respect. Basically, we *want* stuff we can live without, but we cannot do without securing the *needs* for ourselves and those around us if we want peace and live a decent and honorable life.

When I am clear about the distinction between “wants” and “needs,” I can go to God and raise my prayer.

But to be honest, I cannot ask for anything that hasn’t already been given to me! I have food and water, shelter, and love. I have health insurance, an income, a family that loves me; I live in a safe and democratic country where the rule of law is still the norm. I am, in other words, in a privileged position relative to many people both in this country and abroad.

I can easily feel tranquil when I pray the first line of Psalm 23.

For many, whose basic needs are denied or not yet met, it is a prayer that requires much faith.

In fact, I wonder how a homeless person, a battered woman, a war displaced refugee, a jobless person, an exploited worker, a hungry child (...and the list goes on) can pray that psalm if not by leaning on a tremendous amount of faith. Here, the work of caring *advocates* and allies becomes *God’s answer* to their prayer.

When believers put their faith into loving action, those in need have a better sense of a caring and providing Shepherd.

When I know and trust the Shepherd, I am ready to go the extra mile with him and for him. And that's the key: getting to know him as I am known. In that process, I get to know myself better.

We hear that message in today's gospel, we hear of the shepherd who says that he will do anything for his sheep.

The Good Shepherd knows the sheep and they know their Shepherd. That intimate knowledge is more than the ability to recognize a voice or a familiar figure. Those who know the Shepherd also know his willingness to give abundantly and forever, even to give his very life.

The intimate connection with the Shepherd builds the *trust* of the sheep. And vice versa: the Shepherd trusts the sheep will hold on to the goodness and assurance of that intimacy. The Shepherd is ready to lay his life on the line for the sheep. The sheep know that and are empowered to do the same for others (1 John 3:16-24; see John 13:34).

As a commentator<sup>6</sup> to the gospel has brought up, “a dead shepherd isn't helpful to anyone, least of all to sheep left vulnerable to predators, starvation, and scattering. What's a flock to do without the abiding presence of the rod and staff that comfort? How are the sheep to remain safe, healthy, and together without the soothing tenor of the trusted voice that leads them beside still waters and makes them to lie down in green pastures?”

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<sup>6</sup> Austin Shelley, senior pastor of Shadyside Presbyterian Church in Pittsburgh.

I guess the answer is in the relationship built with the Shepherd.

If the Shepherd's Word has become part of them, dwells in them, and lives on in them, there is such a spiritual and eternal union that no noise can distract them from his voice and his message.

That relationship needs to be nurtured and at times renewed. A sheep needs to reengage with the Shepherd, refocus on the sound of his voice, receive and reinterpret the Word, and finally recommit to the Shepherd's lead and way.

There are opportunities to grow spiritually when we get together in public worship or in small Bible studies, in personal prayer times as well as in structured prayer (like Dwelling in the Word, a.k.a. Lectio Divina).

Care to learn ways to get closer to the Shepherd and you will know joy and find rest.

When we follow the Shepherd's lead, we lack nothing. We have all we need to live, to love, and to make life beautiful for others.

May our love be genuine and rich and enjoyable. Amen.