

Faith Promise Sermon

November 14

The *5 Love Languages* a book about the ways in which people personally give and receive love will be 30 years old next year. That's seems incredible to me. When Michele and I were dating we took a kind of pre-marriage course and one of our sessions was on the 5 love languages and we discovered that our languages are basically the opposite. Her languages being physical touch and quality time and mine being words of affirmation and gifts of service means we can never quite agree on how much of our affection should be devoted to snuggling. This is a small challenge in our relationship but is overcome by simply being intentional about showing love.

"Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth."

It seems to me that the Apostle John didn't consult the 5 Love Languages before siding with a particular expression of care for other people: love with your actions.

I read an interesting note on this passage that suggested that though nature is full of evidence of God's creative expression, there is nothing in our natural world that suggests God is loving. In fact, nature can be quite cruel. So how did we come to know God as loving? Well that's part of what God has revealed to us through the revelation of scripture and most notably through his son, Jesus.

John, in our passage points to Christ's willing sacrifice and death as the ultimate expression of God's love. Love through action! Not just the death itself but what the death does for us - grants us a new status in his kingdom - children of God, AND grants access to his eternal inheritance.

Paul wrote it this way: **8** But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. -Romans 5:8

And, John continues, we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters.

To follow Jesus means we must also demonstrate love in this way. To lay down your life for your brothers and sisters or your neighbor doesn't mean you must die for them or be a martyr. To lay down our lives for others happens day by day and bit by bit. It's happening in the ordinary moments in life when you choose that others' interest is valuable and worth pursuing often at the expense of your own.

John gives us a helpful example and it's going to lead us into our discussion of missions this morning:

If you have possessions and you see someone in need and have no pity on them, how could it be said that God's love is in you.

I recently listened to an interview of Charles Barkley, one of the great pro basketball players of the Jordan-era 90s. He was talking about being generous in life since he'd grown up poor and now was a millionaire and his friends were millionaires. He mentioned how stingy Michael Jordan was when they would go out and they would see someone begging on the street. Jordan, worth more than them, would never toss them some money. He'd say, "if they can stand there and say, can I please have \$5, then they could just as easily say, "welcome to McDonald's, can I please take your order?"

Some people who have great means, don't have an ounce of compassion. Some people with little means have great compassion - guess which of those things is most valuable to God!

If you have possessions and you see someone in need and have no pity on them, how could it be said that God's love is in you.

It's not a command so much as a musing. Could someone who elevates Jesus as LORD over their life, who seeks to follow his example of love and peace be completely void of his compassion and benevolence toward people in need? He infers that people who can't share with those in need don't pass the basic test of God's demonstrated love.

Adam Clarke, a Methodist theologian in the late 18th century wrote this concerning our text:

"If we do not divide our bread with the hungry, we certainly would not lay down our life for him. Whatever love we may pretend to mankind, if we are not charitable and benevolent, we give the lie to our profession. If we have not bowels of compassion, we have not the love of God in us; if we shut up our bowels against the poor, we shut Christ out of our hearts, and ourselves out of heaven."

John concludes with "let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth." And it's worth pointing out that John does not delineate between sharing resources and physical action. In other words, giving to the needy IS an action. You can make perfect sense of this by imagining your grandmother (or if you're yourself a grandmother, imagining your son or daughter) needs a new roof. Love in action would be to climb on a ladder and replace it - OR to pay for it to be done.

It would do no good to say, eh your roof is leaky. Well, that's too bad, grandma. See you later. Stay dry out there! As the saying goes, talk is cheap.

James, in his letter to Christian believers, is no less blunt about the connection between faith and acts of love.

14 What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save them? **15** Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. **16** If one of you says to them, "Go

in peace; keep warm and well fed,” but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it? **17** In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.

For some of us, faith accompanied by action is a simple byproduct of our relationship with Jesus. As we have experienced God’s love, so we extend that love to others through acts of service and sharing of resources. This is what mature faith looks like.

For others of us, our acts of service don’t come as natural and we’re still learning to be compassionate. We must intentionally put ourselves in a position to love and aid those who are in need.

You have the power to improve someone’s life by your actions. You can hand-deliver the love of Christ to people in need simply by serving and giving. And there is no shortage of need in this community, in this world.

So how do we get started? What opportunities are there? What organizations are trustworthy? What opportunities have a direct impact on the needy? How do we get in touch with the truly broken and in want of God’s love? How do we make our money and our time count?

How do we begin to exercise that muscle, to train in compassion and acts of love?

I’ve only been around First Church for about 6 years now, but something that I’ve learned is that *THIS* church cares a lot about missions - both local and global. I’ve seen our congregation rise to the occasion for all kinds of acts of service and gifts of compassion: building homes, serving and delivering food, packing meals that’ll be shipped across the world, donating clothes, toys, school supplies, prescription glasses, and on and on. You all are making a difference, and I’ve personally seen you live out that part of our mission: Sent to serve.

You may not, however, know how everything is tied together in a program we call Faith Promise. If you're new around here or you just didn't know, or it's never been made clear to you, I'd like to give you a kind of elevator speech about Faith Promise.

From what I understand about the history of First Church missions is that it used to be a bit pell-mell. Different groups claimed different projects and there were fundraisers all over the place. Nothing was centrally organized and I don't have any clue how that worked with funding and the church budget.

So maybe 8 years ago, we introduced a new mission initiative so we could organize our mission objectives and create a clear path between your donations and mission organizations that greatly benefit from your generosity. We call this Faith Promise.

As of this year, we've partnered with 14 different missionaries and organizations to give away a budgeted \$90,000. That money goes toward providing food, building homes, giving refuge for exploited women, tutoring for children, education for impoverished communities, scholarships for preschool, quilts for babies in the ICU, natural disaster relief, respite care for families with special needs, and resources for the homeless. (and probably a few things I've missed)

About once a month, we give updates about those mission partners so you have a sense of what is happening when you give to Faith Promise. And the time has come for us to make our Faith Promise for 2022.

So far, I'm sure it sounds like Faith Promise is a mission program at our church and it is. But at the heart of Faith Promise is a simple prayer:

"Lord, how much would you give through me that you would not normally give to me for the sake of healing the world in Jesus' name?"

There is a deliberate and careful distinction in that prayer. And this is what I love about Faith Promise. I'm counting on God to come up with the money. That's the faith. And when it comes to me, I promise to pass it along. That's the promise.

I believe that God will answer that prayer in one of three ways:

The first way is what I call the "free money" way. You simply pray, God, whatever extra comes my way, truly extra, I'll donate to Faith Promise.

One of our very first experiences with Faith Promise was the "free money" plan. Michele and I decided to just trust that God was going to make it happen. One afternoon when we were sifting through the mail Michele got a notice from a travel agency saying they appreciated her referral and would be sending her a \$500 check as a part of some promotion they were running. Michele's referral was nothing more than handing off the school trip info (including the travel agency she used) to the next teacher taking over.

We were all excited sitting down for dinner and michele asked out loud..."so what should we spend our money on?" And it popped in my head immediately. "We're supposed to give this money to Faith Promise." That's what the "free money" plan looks like, and I've heard a dozen stories of people giving just like that.

The second is a reality of what happens when we open ourselves up to God through prayer. We naturally start to align ourselves to his mission. In this scenario as you pray you might make a conscious choice to to give to these missions because you sense God calling you to do so. Or as we discussed previously, your relationship with God is causing his love to flow through

you to other people. These people seem to find miraculous room in their budget or find God-given courage to sacrifice in other areas to give.

The third is people that simply look in particular for ways to raise additional funds. They do side work or over time and devote that money to Faith Promise. I have a friend who would regularly though not predictably play piano for weddings and funerals and he had the idea that whenever those would pop up, he'd just forward the money to Faith Promise. It happened once that when meeting with a couple getting married they discussed payment and he mentioned that money paid to him was going straight to missions and they decided on the spot to double the payment.

When we start praying, friends! When we start praying for God to provide through us, we'll hear testimonies of that very thing happening.

I want you to feel confident in the mission partners that we give to. I also want you to feel confident about how they are selected.

Without going into too much detail, you should know that our mission partners are selected by a team of people here at First Church in the Mission and Outreach Committee. There is a vetting process that takes place and to simplify, there are three things they are looking out for.

1. Does a high-majority of the funds reach the people in need?
2. Does the mission of the partner help us fulfill the mission of our church?
3. Does the mission partner have opportunities for us to have hands-on experience and relationships?

So each mission partner must pass by those criteria before they will be considered. And each year as new mission applications arrive it gives the team a chance to re-evaluate that the partners are remaining faithful to the mission we share together.

When I was a sophomore in college, I went on a week-long mission trip to Vida Nueva Ministries in Piedras Negras, Mexico. In Bible college, we had spring break but we also had something called Week of Evangelism (or Week of E for short). This was a requirement of the entire student body - each spring you'd sign up to join a mission team, raise funds, and then head to the mission with 10-15 other students.

On this particular Week of E, we worked with Vida Nueva who has situated themselves to address poverty in the small city. In particular, they work with kids. During our week, we provided meals for kids in the community - about 80ish kids a day in a meal program. We also ran a VBS in the afternoon. Others did more manual labor, mostly digging and painting. Before we crossed the border, we bought our weeks' groceries in Eagle Pass, TX and drove it in.

On the second to last evening, our mission directors told us that after purchasing our food, we had about \$100 left and decided that we would buy additional groceries to be handed out to people in the village.

With \$100 we were able to buy a bags of flour, rice, beans, and sugar. We had enough to give 75 homes a bag of each. So the next afternoon we drove around to homes, most of them just 4 wall shacks with a corrugated metal roof being held together by wire and luck. At the end of the day we felt pretty good about how we used our extra money and it was amazing to see how far \$100 would go.

When we got back from Mexico, maybe the same weekend, a group of friends and I went out to Hard Rock Cafe in downtown St. Louis. I remember that I ordered chicken wings and fries and a coke - one of my favorite meals still to this day. What I also remember is how I felt when I saw the bill in my hand which came out to just over \$100...for 4 people. It's not a shocking amount of money for dinner, though back in the year 2000 it was maybe a little more than I would normally spend. What got me in the moment is knowing how much food that \$100 was worth to someone in the community we'd just spent the week serving.

Don't hear that story and think you should feel guilty about dining out, hear that story and realize the power you hold in both your time but in particular your money. Pastor Scott used to tell us all, money is "portable power" and when we're talking about advancing the Kingdom of God we should be marshalling our

money to do the work of the Gospel where we can't do it ourselves. Not everyone can go on a Week of E, or spend a week in Appalachia building homes, or fly off to Nigeria. Perhaps you're not mobile enough to raise walls at Habitat for Humanity or you don't have a schedule that allows one-on-one tutoring, or working at the Food Truck. But all of us are capable of supporting these missions with our portable power.

So let's go beyond words and speech. Let's love with action! This week you'll be getting some resources in the mail about Faith Promise. And next Sunday you'll have the opportunity to respond with your Faith Promise for 2022. In the next week or two or three, can we put this prayer in our hearts:

"Lord, how much would you give through me that you would not normally give to me for the sake of healing the world in Jesus' name?"