

# "What I Did for Love,"

27 February 2005  
(Lent 3)

Bible passages:

## **I John 3: 16-18a** *The Message*

This is how we've come to understand and experience love: Christ sacrificed for us. This is why we ought to live sacrificially for our fellow believers, and not just be out for ourselves. If you see some brother or sister in need, and have the means to do something about it but turn a cold shoulder and do nothing, what happens to God's love? It disappears. And you made it disappear.

My dear children, let's not just talk about love; let's practice real love.

## **I John 4:7** *The Message*

My beloved friends, let us continue to love each other since love comes from God. Everyone who loves is born of God and experiences a relationship with God.

**The Bible passages we have for this morning have a special significance for me, and I doubt that I knew very many of you when it first became a powerful focus point for my life. This was way back in 1978, when I was a relatively new mother, no longer teaching, but a woman searching for something.**

*A pastor-friend of mine invited me to lunch one day, and shared an idea with me. He hadn't been on the staff at St. Luke's for very long, but he had begun visiting churches that were 10-15% bigger than we were, and assessing the kinds of ministries each church had. One was an idea for what I'd refer to as a "first-level" care ministry. Now, this was long before the inception of Stephen Ministry, so this was a rather new thing. My friend sensed that St. Luke's needed this kind of ministry, and wondered how I would feel about heading it up.*

*That lunch spawned what became the Shepherding ministry at St. Luke's—a ministry that endured quite well until the arrival of Stephen Ministry to the congregation. Now, the way this whole story is connected to the Bible passage is that I would send out letters to prospective leaders, inviting them to become a part of this ministry in the area where they lived, and each letter began with the second Bible passage: My beloved friends, let us continue to love each other since love comes from God. Everyone who loves is born of God and experiences a relationship with God.*

*There was a specific reason I had chosen this passage. Certainly it spoke to me of God's love for everyone of us, but it connected the personal experience of God's love with action—"let us continue to love each other," it said What could be more appropriate? We were to reach out to love one another because God loves us. We don't just capture God's love and put it in a lock box and throw away the key. Rather, God's love for us is intended to make a difference in the way we live our lives. We are to share God's love with*

others.

*In their new book, If God is Love, authors Phil Gulley and Jim Mulholland talk about the implications of God's love, and at one point, the writers share a story attributed to the Jewish philosopher Moses Mendelssohn. It's sort of a "My Three Sons" story, but it makes the point I want to make.*

*The story is about a magic ring that gave its bearer the gifts of grace, kindness and generosity. When the owner of the ring was on his deathbed, each of his three sons came separately and asked him for the ring. The old man promised the ring to each of them.*

*He then sent for the finest jeweler in the land and paid him to make two rings identical to the original. The jeweler did so, and before he died, the father gave each son a ring without telling him about the other two.*

*Inevitably, the three sons discovered that each one had a ring, and they appeared before the local judge to ask his help in deciding who had the real magic ring. The judge examined the rings closely, and couldn't tell the real magic ring from the other two. So he said to the three sons, "Why must anyone decide now? We will know who has the magic ring when we observe the direction your life takes." As a result of the judge's words, each of the three brothers acted as if he had the magic ring by being kind, honest and thoughtful.*

*Gulley and Mulholland use the story to point in a different direction, but they make a comment that fits where we're going today. They say that too many of us consider our faith "a ring to possess, rather than a love to express."*

*I realize that God's love doesn't seem so real to many of us, and that may be because our experiences of human love have in one way or another been limited or conditional. Often, we feel that we are only loved if we're successful, if we're good, if we're attractive, and the list goes on and on. Some of us have a tough time believing that we can be loved just as we are, flaws and all.*

*However, God loves totally and completely, even with all our shortcomings, mistakes and failures. God loves us, even when we don't love ourselves; God's love flows toward us, in us, through us, non-stop. That's just who God is, and that's how God loves.*

*I suspect that most of us see hints of that kind of love in our daily lives. Sometimes there are stories that tell how someone gave an organ so another person could live. That's giving away a part of who we are for someone else.*

*Yet there are times that it's not such a big thing. An unknown writer tells about a husband and wife who were celebrating 50 years of marriage. On their anniversary day, after all the festivities had ended, they made their way home, totally exhausted. However, they decided that a little bedtime snack of coffee with a piece of homemade bread with butter would be just the right thing. The husband took out a new loaf of bread, and began cutting the bread into pieces, handing the end piece (the heel) to his wife.*

*She immediately went into a rage, complaining that he had been dumping the heel of bread on her for 50 years, and she was tired of it. The husband was totally astonished at your explosion. Finally, he said to her quietly, "But, honey, it's my favorite piece." For years, the husband had been sacrificing something he loved for his wife, and she hadn't known or understood it. His explanation changed everything.*

*I can't think about the power of God's love without thinking about how my parents gave up so much for me. I grew up in Madison, Indiana, kind of on the wrong side of the tracks. Early in my life, my dad was a factory worker with only an 8<sup>th</sup> grade education. My Mom had finished high school, and was working as an assistant librarian by the time I got into high school. My parents had high hopes for me: They wanted me to go to college and get a good education, something neither of them had had the opportunity to do. Only later did I realize just how much they had to give up in order for me to go to college, but they did it because they loved me.*

*I didn't know it at the time, but we were probably pretty poor. My dad rode a bicycle to work for years, because we didn't have a car until I was in junior high school. In fact, I recall that I was bedfast the summer after third grade, and my dad would walk to the library downtown every Friday night, returning all the books I had read during the week, and getting me a fresh supply for the following week. He didn't have to do that, but he did it out of love.*

*And then one last story that I may have shared with you before. Just a couple of years before my dad died, I had surgery. By that time, he was limiting his driving to the streets of Madison, and really didn't like to come up here very much at all. I had called him to make sure he knew I was doing OK and that I would be*

*in the hospital for a couple of days.*

*I was standing looking out the window of my hospital room a day or two later, and I saw a car that looked like his pull into the parking lot of St. Vincent. I watched as the man got out of the car and began the long walk toward the door of the hospital. By that time, I was pretty sure it was Dad.*

*However, several minutes passed, and then a half hour, and he hadn't come to my room. Then there he was, in my room, and he was carrying this vase and silk rose. He didn't stay very long, because he wanted to get back home to take care of his dog. After a few minutes, he gave me a kiss, and I watched as he walked back out to his car and drove out of the parking lot.*

*I knew that he didn't like to drive up here, and that he was particularly uncomfortable on 465. I knew that it would be almost dark when he got home, and that he really didn't like to drive after dark, but he came to see him. He drove to Indianapolis and back home to Madison in one day—and he did it out of love.*

*It's almost impossible for me to fully comprehend the magnitude of that kind of love. I can assure you that it didn't fully sink in at the time, but now, years later, I think of it, and I realize that that experience of his love is a hint of the love that God has for me and for you.*

*If all that is true, and I believe it is, then it does change the way we live our lives. It changes how we treat everyone we encounter—not just our friends, but total strangers; not just those in our households, but those neighbors who live around the world; not just the ones who think like we do, but those who have different ideas and opinions; not just those we consider allies, but those we call enemies; not just those who call themselves Christians, but those who are Muslim, Jewish, Hindu, Buddhists; not just those who are like us, but those who are different from us.*

*Our other Bible passage says it very plainly. "This is how we've come to understand and experience love: Christ sacrificed for us. This is why we ought to live sacrificially for our fellow believers, and not just be out for ourselves. If you see some brother or sister in need, and have the means to do something about it but turn a cold shoulder and do nothing, what happens to God's love? It disappears. And you made it disappear.*

*My dear children, let's not just talk about love; let's practice real love."*

*I couldn't say it any better. "My dear friends, let's not just talk about love; let's practice real love."*

*So, I guess the question we need to ask ourselves today and every day is this: "What am I doing for love?"*

#### **CLOSING:**

*Christina Baldwin has said, "Spiritual energy brings compassion into the real world. With compassion, we see benevolently our own human condition and the condition of our fellow beings. We drop prejudice. We withhold judgment." What she calls "spiritual energy," I like to call God's love, and frankly, I think God's love empowers us to do more than drop prejudice and withhold judgment; God's love empowers us to act, and to share that love with everyone in every moment of every day.*

*Tonight and every night, when we go to bed, let's ask ourselves, "What did I do out of love today?"*

*Have a good Sunday, and go in peace. Amen.*