

**TRINITY EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH
MINOCQUA, WI
SERMON FOR APRIL 28 & 29, 2024**

¹⁸ Dear children, let us love not only with word or with our tongue, but also in action and truth.

¹⁹ This is how we know that we are of the truth and how we will set our hearts at rest in his presence: ²⁰ If our hearts condemn us, God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything. ²¹ Dear friends, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have confidence before God. ²² We also receive from him whatever we ask, because we keep his commands and do what is pleasing in his sight. ²³ This then is his command: that we believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and that we love one another just as he commanded us. ²⁴ The one who keeps his commands remains in God and God in him. This is how we know that he remains in us: We know it from the Spirit, whom he has given to us.

(1 John 3:18-24 EHV)

Mother's Day is just two weeks away. How do you handle this Hallmark holiday? Don't get me wrong – I think it's great to honor mothers, and not just on one day, every day. And I'm here to help you with the results of my years of extensive research and experience into what kinds of gifts mothers like to receive. At the top of the list – anything made by children (pictures, artwork, crafts) and time, simple time spent together. Flowers/cards/dinner are all OK, but nothing tops these two items as treasured gifts.

I've also learned what NOT to give mothers. Pots and pans, a toaster, anything for the kitchen seems to be a capital crime especially if given by husbands (and if not asked for). Also in poor taste – a diet cookbook, a gym membership, a scale. Not popular. The apostle John knew nothing of Mother's Day, but he knew about gift-giving. He knew about the greatest gift of all, a gift found not in stores or online, but which originates deep in the heart of God: **Love Without Limits.**

Another gift NOT to give on Mother's Day or on any occasion? Guilt. Moms carry a lot of guilt. We all do. Parents put everything they have into raising their children, and still wonder: have I done enough, did I always do the right thing? Fact is, imperfect parents raise imperfect children. It gets messy, and I'm not talking about changing diapers.

All of us carry guilt, the guilt of sin. Our sinful nature produces a stunning, creative array of sinful thoughts, words, and deeds, just one of which disqualifies us from God's demand of perfection and entrance to heaven. And we're not content just to sin once in a while or a couple times a day. We pile on the guilt, adding to our debt before God every minute of every day. And Satan is relentless. He says sure, Jesus died for you, but your sins are just too terrible or too many to be forgiven. Your pride/selfishness/lovelessness/secret sins – terrible; and you're a repeat offender. Just look at yourself. Look into your own heart. And sure enough, our hearts condemn us.

John speaks to this. ***"If our hearts condemn us, God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything."*** (v. 20) When God sent his Son into the world to lay down his life for our sins, he knew already then exactly what our sins would be, and still he tells us in his Word that the Lord Jesus took away the sins of the world. Forgiveness expresses God's love without limits.

Do you realize what our hearts are trying to tell us when they cause us to doubt our salvation? That our sin is greater than God's grace, that our sin is greater than God's love, that our sin is greater than the work of Christ, that God didn't know what he was talking about when he said that the blood of Jesus purifies us from all sin.

But what does Scripture say? ***"Where sin increased, grace overflowed much more, so that just as sin reigned in death, so also grace would reign through righteousness, resulting in eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord."*** (Romans 5:20b,21). Did you hear that? It is impossible to outsin God's grace – ***"Where sin increased, grace overflowed much more!*** Just before our text, 1 John 3:16 – ***"This is how we have come to***

know love: Jesus laid down his life for us.” echoes John 3:16 – **“God so loved the world that he gave his only-begotten Son.”** Don’t look inside here (heart) for assurance of forgiveness – look to the cross, the empty tomb, look to the Word of God.

But Satan won’t let up. He will hammer you: “You’ve fallen too far, you’ve failed too often, there’s no turning back.” And your heart agrees, “He’s got a point. I often don’t feel forgiven. I’m not worthy of forgiveness.” Someone once asked Martin Luther, “Do you feel that your sins are forgiven?” He answered, **“No, I do not feel that my sins are forgiven, but I know it just as sure as that there is a God in heaven, for feelings come and feelings go, but the Word of God shall stand forever.”** **“If our hearts condemn us, God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything.”** (v. 20)

When our hearts condemn us, there is always a higher court to which we can appeal. We carry our case from this little “justice of the peace” court to the Supreme Court of heaven, and there the Judge tells us that for Jesus’ sake, we are not guilty, that **“though (our) sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow”** (Isaiah 1:18a).

He tells us that the Lamb of God has taken away the sins of the world; he tells us that the blood of Jesus purifies us from all sin. He reminds us that through Baptism, he made us heirs of heaven. He points us to the Lord’s Supper for further tangible evidence of forgiveness. If God himself tells us all this, what business do our hearts have to tell us something else?

God’s forgiveness expresses love without limits. It comes from Jesus free and full and flows through us to others. Forgiveness is ours to give as well. Is there someone you need to forgive? Is there someone from whom you need forgiveness? Remove the condemnation/uncertainty, and find peace in God’s forgiveness.

To know forgiveness is truly a gift from God. It means to have peace with God and with one another. It means to have confidence to stand before God – an amazing thought considering our original state of sin – much like a child feels confidence in the presence of a parent. It means that **“We also receive from him whatever we ask.”** (v. 22a) Really, anything? Two chapters later, John says that we need to ask according to God’s will, which is a good thing because he knows what’s best for us. The point is, we can live in confidence and trust that God will protect us much like a mother protects her child – God’s care is even more encompassing.

In this relationship with God, established by him, **“We keep his commands and do what is pleasing in his sight.”** (v. 22) What is his command? **“That we believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ,** (which is faith, God’s gift to us in the first place) **“and that we love one another just as he commanded us.”**(v. 23) Faith and forgiveness in here (the heart) show itself out here – in our words and actions. Which takes us back to v. 18, **“Dear children, let us love not only with word or with our tongue, but also in action and truth.”**

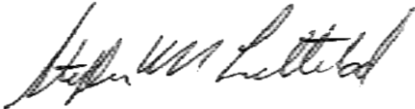
Love without limits isn’t just a verbal thing, something to say. We are to love, not with mere words, but with actions and in truth. Genuine love that shows itself, not pretend love or temporary tolerance, but selfless love rooted in the boundless love of God for us in Christ. Simply put, it’s love in action. Paul’s classic description of love in 1 Cor 13 speaks of this love – not one word about feelings. It’s all action. It’s all about what love does. **⁴ Love is patient. Love is kind. Love does not envy. It does not brag. It is not arrogant. ⁵ It does not behave indecently. It is not selfish. It is not irritable. It does not keep a record of wrongs. ⁶ It does not rejoice over unrighteousness but rejoices with the truth. ⁷ It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. ⁸ Love never comes to an end.”** (vv. 4-8a)

Great stuff, but rather abstract. Love. Truth. What does this mean? What does this look like, right here right now in your life and mine? If God had only given us his Word/Bible and told us that he loves us, that he wants us to love him back and to live by his truth, wouldn’t that have seemed rather remote/distant. OK, whatever. But God sent his Son to be here with us, to be one of us, to be Truth and Love, not just to command us from afar, but to love us from within.

We, too, are not to hide in our homes, offices, churches, behind pulpits and just declare – Hey everyone – truth and love. Do it. Be it. Live it. Like hiding behind pulpit and throwing love/truth bombs. Where’s the love/genuineness in that? God does not want us to hurl truth/love bombs from afar. The problem people

often have with Christians isn't the truth they proclaim, it's the method of delivery. Just as God sent his own Son among us, communicating/showing truth and love up close and personal, so are we to not only speak the truth, but show it/live it among the people we come into contact with.

When the aged apostle John (who lived into his 90s) could no longer walk to meetings of the Church, he was carried by his disciples, and he always said the same thing to those who were gathered together; he reminded them of that one commandment which he had received from Christ Himself, the heart of the new covenant, "My little children, love one another." When the people got tired of hearing the same thing so often, and asked why he always repeated the same thing, he replied, "Because it is the commandment of the Lord, and if this one thing be attained, it is enough." He didn't just say it, he lived it. As Jesus has done, as we will do, by his grace and power.

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Stephen W. Luchterhand". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned above the typed name.

Pastor Stephen Luchterhand
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