



Inset: Our potential Sunday School check-in area for children

“A Future with Hope: Unified”

Fourth Sunday in Easter
Saturday & Sunday, April 21-22, 2018
All Services
The Reverend James S. Dunlop, bishop
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church
Camp Hill, Pennsylvania

1 John 3:16-24; John 10:11-18

I would like to thank you for the invitation to be with you today. It is a great joy to have the opportunity to be with you. Connie and I are members of this congregation, but we don't get here very much. But when we do, it's a joy. So, thank you.

I can't help it sometimes, I just see the world in relation to how business works. This was my background. I was called into ministry and left business behind now, 17 years ago, but I am still fascinated by business. I pay close attention to the business news. One of the reasons is that you can really get a sense of our culture and the nature of the way we are human beings when you watch how we behave in an open marketplace. Whether it is the giant corporation or the hotdog vendor on a street corner in Philadelphia, there is an understanding of how the world functions by paying attention to the marketplace in which we all participate.

Sometimes these business concepts can have a bearing on our understanding of life, and perhaps even our faith. For example, in 1994 there was a business book published by CK Prahalad and Gary Hamel. Their book *Competing for the Future* introduced the concept of what they called core competencies. They said that successful enterprises needed to have core competencies. That they had to have things that provided benefit to customers that were difficult to imitate, can create lots of new things, and were unique to this group. It is difficult to even pin down because it is a combination of the way things worked together.

If you looked at enterprises that were really successful, they have core competencies that they can bring that others don't or can't do. Apple Computer is one of the largest companies in the world, and you might think their core competency is technology or computers. But there are lots of technology and computer companies out there. Their competency is that they make technology easy to use with elegant design. Their products out-sell everyone else's because they are simply easy to use. That's it. Their customers love them. They are hard to imitate. They can use this skill in lots of things from computers to phones and now watches. They are consistently the only ones who can do it. It is not just design, or technology, or branding, or innovation, it's all that combined.

Think about Fed-Ex. They have trucks and planes, but their competency is they know how to move things fast. And Disney, they know how to tell stories, whether in movies or roller coaster rides or Broadway.

For the people who work in these places this is what unifies them. So now you're thinking, why this lecture on business? It's because when I read that 1 John passage this is what popped into my head. That the church's core competency, is defined in there and it starts with these words. "We know love by this that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for one another."

So, is the willingness to die for one another our core competency? No, that is an expression of the core it is, but not the core itself. The core competency of the church is love. It meets all the criteria: It has great benefits; it is clearly difficult to imitate; it can be leveraged through lots of activities; and it uniquely identifies us. It is difficult to pin down because it's a combination of things coming together in our community.

That is what John is impressing on the church in his writing and impresses on us as well. It is an unconditional love that is God's grace, that we as the church have come to understand through Jesus Christ, particularly through the death and resurrection of Jesus. God's willingness to be emptied into Jesus, to demonstrate love and concern to everyone that he encountered, and his willingness to go the cross for the sake of love. The depth of the gift is revealed in the gravity of the demand. The depth of love for each and every one of God's children – us.

In business when you identify your core competencies it only matters if you do something with it. That is what John is telling us as well. That God's love – this incredible gift that we have experienced through Jesus Christ – it only matters if it abides in us and is converted. Converted into something that matters for the community and the world.

And then John poses the question: 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 to help? And that might not be the best translation of what that really says. That "refuses to help" can also be rendered in this way: How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet does not open their heart? The quick answer is, it can't. When God's love truly abides in us then it spills out. We open our hearts to those in need.

Then he goes on to make it clear what our core competency is when he says, "Let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action." It is not enough to talk of God's love. It is not enough to hear and speak of love. We need to put our love into action. That's the core competency of the church. It's what uniquely sets us apart from the world around us. It is what unifies us. The experience of God's love that we have first experienced from Jesus our Lord. That love that abides in us. It is a combination of this love and then our willingness to put unconditional love into action. You see it, and when it is done well, then the church is at its best.

Our mission that we share in the Lower Susquehanna Synod, your synod and mine, is this: Where the hungry are fed as we have been fed by Christ. This is the place where the hungry are fed. And people hunger for so much. For food for instance. Throughout our churches we support food pantries, plant gardens, pack back packs to feed school children on weekends. We're going to do a meal packing at the Synod Assembly.

For 120 years, this congregation, gathered in this place, unified by the love of Christ and our willingness to put it into action, witnessing to the love of Christ through love for one another and for people in the community, through things such as hunger ministries, tutoring school children, going to prisons. And a love for people around the world when we reach out to the troubled places in the world such as Haiti, Guatemala or our partners in the church in Tanzania with help. These are the ways we create new things from this core competency of love.

Yet as I read this text I wonder what more could we do, personally and as a church. What more could I do? Is my life really a reflection of the love of Christ in all I do?

In this passage there is the difficult spot in verse 20 where it says, "Whenever our hearts condemn us; for God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything." What happens when our hearts do not turn to love? When we find ourselves not opening our hearts but rather closing them. When we let our passion for politics turn people that have differing political opinions into objects of ridicule rather than objects of love. How do we love those who make choices with which we do not agree? How do we love those of a different faith tradition? How do we love those that hate us for our faith? How do we love people who use violence and terror against the weak? How do we love the unlovable? Our hearts condemn us the text says. And then it says "God is greater than our hearts. And God knows everything. And we might hear that as God's condemnation for our struggle to love the unlovable, but I hear it as God's love is greater than our love. God knows everything, and God knows that we struggle. God abides in us. When we do not have the capacity, God fills us with what we need. As it says in verse 24, He abides in us by the Spirit that he has given us. God's spirit is at work in us. God working in us to give us a boldness to love.

In verse 21 it says we have a boldness before God. And we receive from God whatever we ask. It almost sounds as if we have God's MasterCard. We get whatever we ask. But it really says, whatever we ask that follows God's commandment of love. That following this core competency that uniquely sets us apart from the world. Who is it that we could boldly bring love to?

As a church we are celebrating 120 years honoring the past and planning for the future. How will we build on the core competency of the church? Who is it that we could boldly bring love to?

As Bishop I am in churches all over this synod and I get to be the head rhymer at lots of anniversary services. And often they are simply celebrations of the past, because there is no vision for the future. Many of our churches are in decline, and the world and the neighborhoods around our churches are changing. In the last ten years membership in our synod churches is down 25%, and attendance is down 30%. Why? Because in some places we have believed that simply doing the same thing over and over again will somehow get a different result. That is what Einstein called insanity

We as the church unified in the love we know from Christ, must plan for a changing world. Not just for the sake of the people who are here, but for the sake of the people

around us who do not know the love of Christ. For our children, and grandchildren. For my grandchildren Charlie and Jack, whom I entrust to you in this community of faith, while I serve the larger church. For the people who have not yet been born.

Does this generation have to make sacrifices for the future generations? Hear again John's words, "How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet does not open their heart?"

The world now more than ever – now more than ever – needs the love of Christ. The world needs us to boldly reveal the love of Christ – the very thing that is our core competency. It has great benefits for the world. It is clearly difficult to imitate, and it can be leveraged through all our activities together. It uniquely identifies us. It is difficult to pin down, because it is a combination of things that occur. It is what unifies us. And God, through the apostle John, is saying to us, "God's love abides in us. God's hope abides in us. And God is asking us to be bold.

Amen.

Copyright © 2018, James S. Dunlop. All rights reserved.



www.trinitycamphill.org