IS IT REALLY THAT SIMPLE?\*3
Scripture: 1 John 3:16-24

FOCUS: Are calling is simple but never easy, to believe in Jesus and to love one another.

It is easy as 1 2 3, a b c. It is easy as pie. It is as easy as falling off a log. I’m sure you can think of some other similar idioms. But there are some issues with such generalizations. Indeed there are issues with most generalizations, but that is a discussion for another day. It has been my experience that nothing in life is as simple as we would like for it to be.

It seems to me that sometimes my easy as 1 2 3 stuff gets all jumbled and comes out as 2 1 3 or combines to become a 6 or drops a digit or two and is anything but easy. And think about times you have heard said or have said yourself, ***‘It is as easy as that.”***  When we utter such words we are generally talking about things which are easy for us but might not be so for others. I think back to the days when I tried to occasionally play golf. When I went to the driving range with the club pro everything looked really easy when he was demonstrating. He would assure me that it could be easy for me as well. ***“Just relax, keep your eye on the -ball, shift your weight as you move through the ball, be sure to follow through, left arm straight, and keep you head down.*** Easy for him to say. Easy for him to do. Not so easy for me.

And what about that pie thing! I have never quite figured that out. For some of you pie might be easy to make but I wouldn’t even know where to start. And I am pretty sure that even if I were to find a good recipe, making it would not be easy and the results would probably not be Food Network worthy! I was curious about the origin of that one but never found any really good explanation. Most sources agreed with my assessment that making a pie is not easy. One theory is that it was a reference to eating pie. Now I will have to say that too easy for me!

When it comes to matters of our Christian faith and what it is really all about, it is pretty simple. That is what our scripture this morning tells us. In verse 23 we are told that all we must do is believe in God’s Son, Jesus Christ and love one another. To use another cliché, it’s a piece of cake!

But we who seek to be true disciples day by day know that while it may be simple. It is anything but easy. There is a big difference between simplicity and ease. If you are struggling to make ends meet, what are you going to do about the situation? The answer is simple. Make more money and your problem will go away. If you are facing a debilitating illness and wish to recover the answer is simple. Get well and you will no longer struggle. If you have a rebellious child and want that child to see the light, the answer is simple, the child just needs to understand how foolish he or she is being and should modify their behavior accordingly.

But enabling these simple solutions is often anything but easy. Some of you know that finding a new job which pays more, or finding a job at all in this economy, can be anything but easy. And all of us who have children or have ever been children know that foolish behavior in one degree or another is simply a part of the journey toward adulthood. Come to think of it we adults are rather skilled at being foolish on occasion ourselves. It isn’t easy to avoid foolishness. We encounter it every day, and on many days we participate in it. And who hear doesn’t have some ache or pain, some disease, some disability of which you would love to be relieved and without which life would be easier. If only we could be rid of that physical limitation and get well. But our bodies don’t always cooperate. Life offers many simple solutions which are difficult, sometimes impossible, to implement.

So we come back to the words of the apostle John. It is thought that this letter was written in Ephesus near the end of the apostle’s life. It was meant, at least in part, to refute one of the great heresies of the early first century, Docetism, which held that Jesus actually had no mortal, human body and that he was in fact fully and only divine, that his bodily appearance and manner were phantom in nature. So we find that John is wanting to be abundantly clear, to proclaim that Jesus literally gave his life, literally suffered and died for us, literally knew all the struggles and joys of being completely mortal.

A second focus of the letter is on the whole issue of sin. It is a plea to the faithful to put aside sin and to be diligent in their efforts to reflect the kind of life Jesus lived as he was among the people. It was important to John that the his audience, and that includes us, understand the way Jesus lived and comprehend the amazing truth that his life was the one and only example of true humanity, of the way God intended us mortals to live from the beginning.

Once again we come to the simplest of guidelines. It is all about love, love which is the only true antidote for sin. We hear a lot about love these days. Much of it is frivolous if not downright disgusting. Some mistake lust for love. Others, some of us included, use the term for everything from sports franchises to afternoon snacks. But John is commending to use genuine love, the only kind of love which is of real value. And how is it defined? In The Message we read ***“This is how we’ve come to understand and experience love: Christ sacrificed his life for us.”*** Real love is not about warm feelings and personal preference, it is about sacrifice and action. It is simple to **say** that we must be about love, but actually being about love is far from easy.

I am sure most of you have heard me talk about what was probably the most enlightening thing I encountered in the four or five summers, I really can’t remember now how many they were, that I attended the Course of Study at Emory’s Candler School of Theology in Atlanta. I don’t remember the teacher’s name but I can picture the lecture hall where we gathered. It was one of those large rooms with theatre style raised seating. We were spread out all across the room as it was actually a rather small class. The course was Christology. That is the ivory tower word for the study of Jesus. It was the first day and we were asked to write down our thoughts concerning the purpose of Jesus coming to be incarnate, that is fully human and living among the people. We turned in our papers and he read all the answers.

I don’t remember what I wrote, but I am fairly certain it was, like most of the other answers, rather lengthy and designed to show how intelligent and thoughtful I was. I do remember being unmoved by many of the other answers and probably there were those there who were equally unimpressed by mine. But I will never forget what that teacher said as he began a class on the nature of Jesus. He said, ***“If you don’t remember anything else from our time together remember this. Jesus came to show us what God is like and to demonstrate what we are meant to be like.”*** I didn’t remember anything else but I did remember that simple but profound explanation.

Jesus came to show us what God is like, to reflect the priorities and characteristics of our creator. The lectionary Psalm for this week is that most familiar of all the Psalms, number 23. It was penned by David long before Jesus had come to be among us, but it is a clear reflection of the nature of God which would be fully revealed in the life of Christ. The shepherd image is a common thread throughout scripture and was a familiar one for the Hebrew people. David was himself a shepherd. In both Old Testament and New Testament times the people of God were a pastoral people, familiar with the herding and keeping of sheep.

As vivid as the images of the beloved Psalm are to us, they were even more profound for the people who first read them. The people of God were keenly aware, many of them from having shepherded themselves, of the way that shepherds cared for often clueless sheep. There were no fenced pastures with barbed wire for protection. The sheep wandered and were under the constant watchful and protective eye of the shepherd as they roamed. And good shepherds made sure that the needs of the sheep were always met.

Good shepherds would find lush green meadows where weary sheep could safely rest as the shepherd kept watch. Good shepherds would insure that the sheep found quiet pools of water from which to drink. Those who first read David’s words would know that still waters were a must for the safety of the sheep. When the sheep would drink they would often enter the water and stand there drinking. If you have ever gotten a wool sweater wet you know how well wool retains water and how heavy it becomes as it soaks it up. It was not uncommon for sheep to enter the flowing waters of active streams and to quickly become weighed down by the water trapped in their wool and to then be swept downstream. Unless the shepherd was close by and alert the sheep could quickly be pulled under and often would drown. It was imperative that sheep be led to drink only in the calm still water from which they could easily retreat.

So we read those familiar words, ***“The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside still waters.”***  We are sheep, God’s sheep. And we are fully capable of jumping into rushing waters without thinking. We are impulsive people. That is why we are constantly bombarded with advertising. Merchants careful place certain products at eye level for small children to encourage them to pester parents to add sugary sweets to the cart. In this electronic age merchants have come up with all kinds of ways to tempt us to buy stuff we really don’t need. Targeted ads based on our browsing history are place on our screens as we surf the web. In some malls suggested purchases are sent to customers phones as they pass near items which some fancy algorithm has determined might be tempting based on browsing history.

Oh how I need a shepherd who is willing to lead me to the still waters of simplicity and peace. I need a shepherd who is even willing to reach out his crooked staff and pull me in from the rushing waters of distraction into which I too often wander. David tells us that we have just such a shepherd. And Jesus was a master at leading to still waters. He brought peace to the restless, hope to the hopeless, grace to the undeserving, and salvation to the lost. By the power and presence of his Holy Spirit, Jesus offers still waters to we who so need them today. He tells us to share with him the worries which threaten to overwhelm us and pull us under restless currents.

We need for the Lord to lead us away from rushing streams and toward still waters. And we need, at times, to be made to lie calmly in the comfort and protection of lush green pastures of love and grace, there to rest and be renewed. The Lord routinely has to tell me to put down some of my electronic gadgets so that I can hear, not the breaking news stories, not the latest rumor from the college football recruiting wars, not about what one of my Facebook friends had for lunch, but eternal truth and the call to live in its light. God is calls me to make time to rest in green pastures and sometimes I am willing to go there, but not often enough. I suspect you are much the same. It isn’t easy, this thing called discipleship. We are often tempted to stray. That is why we need a shepherd. May God grant us all the wisdom to follow him more often to stillness and refreshment so that we might be made ready there for service in God’s name as we move forward.

We must begin, John tells us by believing in the name of God’s son, Jesus Christ. We do that as we allow him to be our shepherd, as we recognize in him the pure reflection of God’s glory and allow him to lead us day by day. Then, once we truly believe we must answer a call to action. Being Christian is simple. Believe in Jesus and love one another. Simple, yes, but any of us who are now or have ever been in love know that loving is never easy, rewarding yes, but not easy.

I came across a paraphrase of Ephesians 2:8-10 this week written by Richard Rohr which I think does a good job of tying our two instructions, to believe in Jesus and to love one another, together rather well. ***“To show how infinitely rich God is in grace, you are all saved by a total gift and not by anything you have done, so that nobody can ever claim the credit. You are God's work of art created to live the good life as God meant us to live it from the beginning!"***

Wow, we are God’s artwork. I am both comforted and disturbed by that image. I love the truth that we are made by God in a magnificent and wonderful way, crafted by the hand of the master craftsman according to the master’s design. But I am also troubled by the knowledge that I have not been as careful as I ought to preserve the beauty of this collection of cells called John, this object of God’s handiwork.

Most of the time I do pretty well with the believing in Jesus part, though at times I fail even there. But what I most need to work on is the part of being like Jesus in the way I live and relate to others, of preserving this precious work of art. I need to work on that loving one another part. Oh, I’m pretty good at preaching it. But that is easy. Where I fail is in that loving not in word but in truth and in action part. Peterson puts it quite well in his paraphrase of verses 18 and 19. ***“Let’s not just talk about love; let’s practice real love. This is the only way we’ll know we’re living truly, living in God’s reality.”***

So there you have it. All you must do in order to preserve that work of art you were created to be, in order to be truly a child of God, is to believe in Jesus and to practice real love. Not easy, but eternally rewarding. And we can do it if we abide in the Spirit and allow the Spirit to abide in us. For your sake, for the sake a world in need of real love and for the sake of the Kingdom of the one who came to show us true love and real living, let it be so. In the name of the Father and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, AMEN.