

Pastor Kenneth Mars
St. John's Lutheran Church – Kimball, NE
100th Anniversary Vespers
June 26, 2016
Text: I John 3:16–24

Grace be to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Dear saints of God, current members of St. John's, past members, honored guests, this is the day the Lord has made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it! And we have every reason in heaven and earth to rejoice. You are the beloved of the Lord Jesus Christ, holy and precious in His sight.

Today, we celebrate the abiding love of the Lord Jesus for this congregation and her people since her founding, 100 years ago. It is a mysterious and glorious truth that through Christ, we are connected to each another in unbreakable bonds that transcend time and circumstances. Elmer Flohr was the first person baptized in our congregation. On November 19, 1916, Elmer received the washing of regeneration and renewal through baptismal waters combined with God's Holy Name.

In Jesus, we are connected to Elmer and every saint of God that has lived in every age, in every nation, in every culture. All of us, are united together in Christ's love. This congregation has been in existence for 100 years – thanks be to God – but our union with Christ and His holy Christian Church cannot be limited to a single century. It is not without reason the Bible declares God's steadfast love endures forever.

God's love for you, and all His people, is not shown in mere sentiment or emotion but in a very concrete, tangible way. The apostle John reminds us of character and nature of that love. He knew it, experienced it first hand, for he was an eyewitness to it. "By this we know love, that he (Jesus) laid down his life for us" (vs. 16). God loves you because Jesus died on the cross for you.

The old Sunday School hymn says, "Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so." That's certainly true enough. The Bible is our Holy Spirit-inspired source of knowledge about God. But the Biblical witness always directs our attention to Jesus; who He is, what He did, and what He promises yet to do. The eternal Son of God the Father almighty took upon Himself our human flesh and blood for the express purpose of laying down His life us. And by so doing, He demonstrates His love for you and

me and every human being. John 3:16, that most famous of Bible passages, beautifully and powerfully proclaims God's love for the world shown in the giving of the Son unto death and resurrection so that the world might be saved.

The apostle Paul, in Romans 5:8, also teaches that knowledge of God's love is found in the crucifixion of God's Son. He writes, "God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us." Dear beloved of the Lord, know this one thing with absolute, unshakeable certainty: God loves you unquestionably and irrevocably because Jesus died to save you from sin, death, shame, and eternal degradation. Jesus loves you with such intensity that He would not be parted from you. He endured rejection, suffering, death, and rose from the grave on Easter morning to show you His love for you. By this we know love, that Jesus laid down his life for us. We are a beloved people, the beloved of the Lord who are redeemed unto life filled with glory inexpressible.

It is that love this congregation has believed and lived in for 100 years. It is that self-giving, sacrificial love that we shall abide in forever in the glories of the new heaven and new earth.

There is, however, another side of being the beloved of the Lord. I really stopped too soon in quoting vs. 16. Let me read it completely, "By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers." Jesus' divine love so captivates us that it moves us to live in love toward one another. And that love is always revealed in concrete actions.

During His earthly ministry, Jesus encouraged the downcast, relieved the suffering and the afflicted, died our death, rose from the dead, and is now preparing our eternal inheritance in His kingdom. In these concrete ways, Jesus shows His love for His people. We live in that divine love by receiving it in faith unto the forgiveness of our sins and eternal life and by giving of ourselves to our neighbor in need. Abiding in Christ's love has both aspects; two sides of the same coin.

Demonstrating and living in God's love always begins at home: husbands love your wives, wives love you husbands by faithfully providing for each other according to the other's needs. Parents love your kids and kids love your parents; each according to your vocation and calling. As neighbors, lay down your lives for others by fulfilling your daily vocations at work and in your civic duties; relieve the poor and the suffering as you are able; encourage the downtrodden, pray unceasingly for the world

and all her many troubles. Strive for justice and equity in your neighborhoods and communities. Serve our country and our world with Christ's love. "Little children," writes the apostle John, "let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth" (vs. 18).

Those early Iowa Synod German Lutherans of Kimball were not content merely to talk about God's love or consider God's love an abstract idea. They took concrete action. In faith toward God and in love for one another, they did what was necessary to establish a Christian congregation, purchase a church building, call a pastor so that God's love might abide among them through Word and Sacraments. Such deeds of love and truth continued in various ways. Through good times and bad times, the membership of St. John's laid down their lives in service to each other and the larger Kimball community. Sacrifices were made so that the gospel of Jesus could continue to be received in all its glorious truth and beauty. Did we ever live in Christ's love perfectly? No. We are a congregation of sinners, imperfect to be sure, but redeemed unto eternal life in Christ. Day in and day out, year after year, we were simply abiding in Christ's love. That's the legacy of this congregation. Abiding in Christ's love.

That two-sided understanding of Christian discipleship, receiving the love of Jesus through faith unto eternal life and love shared with one another in our day to day lives, is what we are commanded to pursue until Christ comes again in glory. I John 3:23 states, "And this is his commandment, that we believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us." It's simple, but profound. To love God is to have faith in Him and love the people He has placed in our lives.

That is the commandment given to us. Vs. 24, "Whoever keeps his commandments (faith in Jesus and love toward one another) abides in him, and he in them. And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit whom he has given us." Abiding in Christ is a Spirit-filled life of faith and love.

I have had the privilege of serving this congregation for a tenth of her history. I never cease to be amazed as I witness and observe the dynamic vitality of the faith and love found in this congregation. These folks here want to be Lutheran; that is, they want to know and live out their most holy Christian faith in obedience to the Lord Jesus Christ. We believe, teach, and confess the Holy Scriptures as explained in our Lutheran Confessions. We cherish the purity of doctrine we have received from our fathers in the faith. But that commitment to pure doctrine, always expresses itself in

love toward others. That love is manifested in so many ways, often small and largely unnoticed. But it's always there. It's truly beautiful to behold. You guys are simply the best. And I love you dearly.

Today, we rejoice in 100 years of abiding in Christ's love. And it is good that we do so. But I'm looking forward to the next 100 years! This is the day the Lord has given to us. This is the time for us to shine all the brighter, to be beacons of hope and grace for a world that needs Jesus. Abiding in Christ through faith and love. That's what our forebears in the faith did. And by God's grace, so shall we do until Christ comes again. To God alone be all glory honor and praise unto the ages of ages.

✠ In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. ✠ Amen.

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.