

April 21, 2024 (In Honor of Earth Day)

1 John 3:16-24

Sermon Title: Inconvenient Love

¹⁶ We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers and sisters. ¹⁷ 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 help?

¹⁸ Little children, let us love not in word or speech but in deed and truth. ¹⁹ And by this we will know that we are from the truth and will reassure our hearts before him ²⁰ whenever our hearts condemn us, for God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything. ²¹ Beloved, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have boldness before God, ²² and we receive from him whatever we ask, because we obey his commandments and do what pleases him.

²³ And this is his commandment, that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us. ²⁴ All who obey his commandments abide in him, and he abides in them. And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit that he has given us.

Please pray with me. God be in our heads and in our understanding. God be in our eyes and in our looking. God be in our mouths and in our speaking. God be in our hearts and in our thinking. Amen.

God be in me. God be in us. This is the gist of our passage for today, that God will so fully dwell in us that God’s divine love is manifest in us. It is at the heart of the word “abide” that we so often read in scripture. God abides in us. And like any relationship, our relationship with God is a relationship that needs tending. Our prayers connect us with God. Seeking and repenting can be a means of tending this relationship. And lest you get hung up on the word repentance, the Greek word *metanoia* means “change of mind.” So, as we strive to grow in our faith, our minds are being shaped in God-like ways. Additionally, mindful practices also awaken us again and again to God with us. Mindfulness provides space for us to consider our intentions and make thoughtful choices.

So how do we know God is in us, abiding in us? The answer is so simple, and yet profound; by our love for one another. The writer of our epistle lesson for today points us to the example of Jesus. Jesus stayed true to his message of love and acceptance, even when faced with death for doing so. Jesus laid down his life for others. In the

gospel of John, we read that there is no greater love than to lay down your life for someone. Jesus did it and the writer of 1 John tells us we “ought” to do the same.

Found in almost every translation of this verse, that word; “ought.” I confess that “ought” is not one of my favorite words. It’s a word that triggers shame when we don’t do as we ought. It can also trigger anger when it feels like we are being saddled with one more thing we ought to be doing. I know how I wince when someone looks down their nose at me and tells me what me what I ought to be doing. But here it is, we ought to lay down our lives for one another. It is a radically counter-cultural message in this era of rights and entitlement. Yet, it is a teaching we are called, or should I say, “we ought” to embody, just as Jesus embodied it.

Before I go further, I want to be clear on one point. This verse is not suggesting that we lay down like doormats, allowing others to walk all over us or abuse us. What it is suggesting, however, is that we willingly choose to set self-interest aside for the benefit of another person or group of people.

Stories abound about people we label as heroes; people who put themselves in harms way and/or make huge sacrifices to save others from peril. These are important stories to tell – but not today. Most of us will never be faced with the decision to literally lay down our lives for someone else.

Yet, daily, we have opportunities to lay down things like our personal comfort, our time, or our freedom to do as we please, in the name of love. And if we consciously choose to seize these opportunities, they can be mindful actions and a means of tending our relationship with God. It can be another way of praying, “God be in me.”

For example, when I go to the grocery store to buy produce, I take mesh bags as an alternative to using the plastic bags provided by the store. Sometimes this means walking back to my car to get them from my trunk. Sometimes this means pulling back into the garage and running back up to my condo to get them out of my closet. Sometimes this means choosing not to go to the store because I don’t have my bags with me. The mesh bags are an inconvenience. And like most people, I don’t like being inconvenienced.

On the other hand, I ought to care about the environment. I ought to care about the generations to come who will have to deal with the blight of plastic and microplastics now contaminating our oceans, waterways, animals, even humans. I ought to lay down my need for convenience out of love for those impacted by plastic production and

waste. I ought lay down the convenience of plastic, for the sake my neighbor today and my neighbor in generations to come.

You could argue that the six or seven plastic bags I don't use from the store are not going to make one iota of impact to the six million plus metric tons of plastic waste created each year. You would be correct. With a little digging, you might discover that the creation of mesh bags has unintended consequences as well. Instead of assuming any responsibility, you might even decide to point fingers in another direction saying the real culprits driving the staggering increase in plastic production are fossil fuel industries. "Over 99% of plastic is made from chemicals sourced from fossil fuels, and the fossil fuel and plastic industries are deeply connected."¹

In the grand scheme of things, my noble sacrifice of six or seven plastic bags at the store will have virtually no impact on the problem of plastic pollution, and yet, small actions add up. And these small actions have the potential to impact me; my awareness, my habits, my spirit.

I have begun to think of those mesh bags as a spiritual practice, an opportunity if you will, to choose love over convenience. My mesh bag of mesh bags invites me to consider my neighbor and the impact of my consumption and waste upon their lives. Every time I must walk an extra ten steps because I have forgotten my bags, I have the opportunity to transform my grumbling into an intentional, mindful, act of love. The inconvenience, the awareness, the follow through, results in repentance and love. My choosing to be inconvenienced has the potential to be a sacred act.

Tomorrow is Earth Day, and the theme is "Planet vs. Plastics."

In 1863, celluloid, the first iteration of plastic, was created as a substitute for the ivory used in making billiard balls. The inventors went on to create celluloid dentures, combs, brush handles, piano keys, and knickknacks. What started out as a response to the scarcity of ivory, tortoise shell, and coral has now grown exponentially into a problem of superabundance.²

How did this happen? "Plastics made from fossil fuels are just over a century old. Production and development of thousands of new plastic products accelerated after World War II to the extent that life without plastics would be unimaginable today. Plastics revolutionized medicine with life-saving devices, made space travel possible, lightened cars and jets—saving fuel and lessening pollution—and saved lives

¹ <https://www.ciel.org/issue/fossil-fuels-plastic/>

² <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2023/07/03/book-reviews-plastic-waste>

with helmets, incubators, and equipment for clean drinking water. The conveniences plastics offer, however, led to a throw-away culture that reveals the material's dark side: Today, single-use plastics account for 40 percent of the plastic produced every year. Many of these products, such as plastic bags and food wrappers, are used for mere minutes to hours, yet they may persist in the environment for hundreds of years."³

If you do anything this earth day, please take some time to research the problem of plastic pollution and its devastating global impact. Learn why recycling is a viable solution. Less than 9% of all plastic is recycled. Learn about microplastics and how they are now being found everywhere. Do your homework. When a plastic utensil says it is compostable, read the fine print. It likely says, "compostable only in a commercial composter," which doesn't exist for public use.

It will take an international, aggregated effort to solve this problem. The INC (Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee) is working on a Global Plastics Treaty. Locally, we can participate and support cleanup efforts. We can recycle. We can reuse packaging and take-home containers. We can support bans on single use plastics. We can reduce our consumption of plastic straws, plastic lids, plastic bags, plastic cups, plastic wrap, and plastic bottles. We can look for alternative products in less harmful packaging. We can refuse to accept straws and plastic ware. We can change our habits and appetites. We can choose to use our voices to encourage businesses and people we know to reduce their use of single-use plastics. We can lead community efforts. The average American throws away more than 100 pounds of single use plastic every year. The US is second only to Australia.

Without shaming people, and without smugness, there are things we can do, beginning with our willingness to be inconvenienced. I realize that it is almost impossible to avoid single-use plastics. But we can do better. We ought to do better. Our reading from 1 John says, "*we ought to lay down our lives*" for each other. Maybe instead of thinking about heroic, sacrificial acts, when we read this passage, we can think about laying down a convenience. Instead of grumbling about being inconvenienced, maybe we can catch ourselves and reframe the inconvenience into an opportunity – an opportunity for God to continue to stir in us and to shape us – so much so the ought is no longer needed.

Yesterday, I visited Bob, who is receiving hospice care at Cedars Sinai hospital. This past week there has been a steady stream of colleagues, friends, church folk, and former students visiting Bob and facetimeing Bob. He and Salli have been surrounded

³ <https://education.nationalgeographic.org/resource/worlds-plastic-pollution-crisis-explained/>

by love. I commented to him about the impact he has had on people's lives and how inspiring it is that he remained invested in the lives of students he had as many as 50 years ago. Before I left his room, he pulled me close and said, "It's the little things."

Don't ever underestimate the power of little things to transform our lives and the world. A well-known quote of Mother Teresa is, "*Not all of us can do great things, but we can do small things with great love.*" In small ways we can lay down our lives when God's great love is in us. We can lay down a convenience, we can lay down our comfort, we can lay down our time. We can make an effort. We can do something. It's the little things.

We may not be the ones to solve the problem of plastic pollution, but we can be part of the solution. We may not be the ones to bring world peace, but we can bring peace into our hearts and our homes and our communities. We may not be able to change the world, but we can change our minds. Every day we make little choices. May those choices reflect God in us.

May God be in our heads and in our understanding. May God be in our eyes and in our looking. May God be in our mouths and in our speaking. May God be in our hearts and in our thinking. Amen.

When you choose to inconvenience yourself, you are actively participating in the world around you. As humans, we find meaning and purpose in many different ways. Slowing down to “stop and smell the roses” from time to time is a great way to keep you on track of feeling present in your own reality. [Failing to examine or alter our habits can have a deadening effect on our lives.](#)

While our brains are naturally inclined to opt for the [least challenging and most convenient routes](#), it takes active, cognizant effort to inconvenience yourself. To find the places your brain has developed these ruts of repetition, try to proactively notice the moments you are doing the same thing the same way around the same time of day. <https://simplypsych.com/inconvenience-yourself-blog/>