

Love in Action
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“Love in Action” Pilgrim Church UCC April 26, 2015—Fourth Sunday of Easter

(1 John 3:16-24)

Something remarkable happened during this year's Boston Marathon. A man from Venezuela named Maickel Melamed finished in last place at 5 AM. It took him 20 hours to complete the race as he endured hours of rain, wind, and cold to cross the finish line long after he began. Melamed has muscular dystrophy. He said to reporters afterwards, "I know that people see me walking, but to me, it's running to my maximum potential . . . the message here is that love is so much stronger than death. It was an honor to run the streets of this city." [1] Melamed has run marathons in New York, Chicago, Berlin, Tokyo, and now Boston, hoping that his efforts inspire people.

As he toiled along the course, he was joined by a volunteer team from Vamos, a Caracas-based organization who focuses on youth. That's remarkable in and of itself—that Melamed and his team of volunteers endured the elements for 20 hours together. When I saw this story on the news, the focus was on Melamed as it should be. To accomplish a marathon given his muscular dystrophy is inspiring and does show that love is stronger than death. But it's striking that his team of volunteers sheltered him from the storm. They held up umbrellas, counted his steps, and tried to block the wind and rain with their bodies as they walked with him for 26.2 miles and 20 hours of bitter New England weather.

Looking at those people who are clearly so devoted to this man and his message of hope echoes the Biblical calls to love one another. This is loving not just in word and speech, but in truth and action. Yes, Maickel Melamed is an inspiration and should be honored for his courage and perseverance in the face of adversity. But his team who stood beside him, sometimes even holding him up when he was about to collapse, should also be honored for the deep love their actions convey.

Most of us have heard time and again that "God is love." [2] Yet we may not recall that this comes from the New Testament Letter of 1 John. The circumstances surrounding the letter are hard to know. Scholars think that the letter was written after 100 C.E. likely in Ephesus by an author who was part of an early Christian community who deeply valued the Gospel of John. Because that really narrows it down! At some point, there was community conflict possibly over the idea that Jesus was just a spiritual being who only appeared to be human.

So someone from within the Christian community in Ephesus penned 1 John to urge the people to stay with what they've heard from the beginning—that Jesus was a human being and the divine Son of God. There's power and saving value in Jesus' death on the cross. And we must keep the commandment that Jesus gave us—to love one another for "God is love." If we want God's love to abide in us, we had better see a brother or sister in need and help them. We had better love, not just in word or speech, but in truth and action. Simple enough, right?

Unfortunately this can remind us of G.K. Chesterton's great quote that, "Christianity has not been tried and found wanting; it has been found difficult and not tried." If we take to heart Jesus' commandment to love one another, that means putting ourselves out there and making ourselves vulnerable. Love is give and take, it's trust, it's vulnerability. It means loving people that we may not even like very much sometimes. It means that our words matter and that our

actions speak loudly. It's sitting with that piercing 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?"[3] These words in 1 John can make us squirm in our pews as we contemplate how we live them out today. Because Christianity has been found difficult and sometimes not even tried.

It's like one of my favorite movie scenes from *A League of Their Own* about the All American Girls Professional Baseball League. Dottie Henson is the main character, the anchor of the team and their star catcher. Once her husband comes home from World War II, she thinks about leaving her baseball team to go back home and be with her family. Her manager Jimmy Dugan confronts her about sneaking off and quitting. Dottie tells him that she doesn't need to play baseball anymore. It just got too hard. And Jimmy Dugan tells his star catcher as she's about to walk away: "It's supposed to be hard. If it wasn't hard, everyone would do it. The hard is what makes it great."

The hard is what makes it great! Yes, this is a movie quote about baseball. But it can be applied to our Christian faith just as easily. If it wasn't hard, everyone would do it! The hard is what makes it great. It's hard because Jesus' teachings about love in action can fundamentally change the way that we live. It's not just about saying I love you, it's about showing I love you.

All of this gets into a debate that's been going on for centuries in Christianity. Orthodoxy vs. Orthopraxy. Right belief vs. right action. Typically, a Christian who emphasizes orthodoxy focuses on right beliefs and the authority of scripture and classical tradition. These folks tend to love creeds, confessional statements, and scripture that is typically interpreted in more literal ways. If they had a theme song it could be "Tradition" from *Fiddler on the Roof*. On the other hand, a Christian who emphasizes orthopraxy focuses on right actions and the authority of experience. These folks tend to love Prophetic writings and call attention to social justice and experiences of suffering, oppression, and marginalization. If they had a theme song it could be "Eye of the Tiger" from *Rocky* as they are about to run up those stairs and fight for the underdog. If you get one or both of these songs stuck in your head today, sorry about that.

It seems that we've been pitting orthodoxy and orthopraxy against each other for a good long time. So what's great about 1 John is that it's this New Testament letter about the importance of both our beliefs and our actions. About what faith in Jesus Christ looks like and what mutuality in loving community looks like. For too long, we've been fighting these battles of beliefs vs. action (faith vs. works.) Yet, we need both beliefs and actions if we're going to live in this world as Christians. It doesn't make it easy to need both, but the hard is what makes it great.

Here's the thing, if the Christian community in Ephesus didn't care at all what people believed, then they wouldn't have taken the time to clarify that Jesus really was a human being. He wasn't just a spiritual being walking around the earth. They wouldn't have taken the time to write this letter in the first place to emphasize the teachings of Jesus and who Jesus was while he was with us on this earth. Our beliefs do matter.

Now why does that matter? If we think that Jesus was both human and divine, that means that God has lived through, witnessed, and felt what we have because Jesus lived a human life. If we know that Jesus was a human being, it means that he was born, lived, and died. Jesus suffered, got angry, wept when a friend died, and was rejected and betrayed by people he loved. Jesus also drank wine at a wedding and fried some fish on the beach with his friends. Because Jesus was a person, it means that in Jesus God isn't distant. God has come to us and shared out common lot.

Most of us are a-okay with the humanity of Jesus. As we probably should be since Jesus of Nazareth was a real historical figure. Some of us may have trouble or just not really believe in the divinity of Jesus. And that's okay in a denomination like the United Church of Christ. Now we do have denominational beliefs outlined in our UCC Constitution. In the Preamble to our UCC Constitution one can read that Jesus Christ, Son of God and Savior, is the Sole Head of our church. We look to the Scriptures and the Holy Spirit to help us be Christians in the world. We claim the faith of the historic Church expressed in the ancient creeds and reclaimed in the insights of the Protestant Reformation. We affirm the responsibility of the Church in every single generation to make the faith our own in worship, thought and expression, and purity of heart before God. Finally, we recognize two Sacraments: Baptism and Communion.[4]

These beliefs laid out in the Preamble of our UCC Constitution are perhaps as close as we get to orthodoxy. Not very close! We have beliefs as a denomination, but we don't have theological litmus tests about them. You don't have to agree with every single statement of belief I just outlined from our Constitution. In fact, we view our diversity of beliefs as one of our strengths. We're a denomination that tends to emphasize orthopraxy (right actions) over orthodoxy (right beliefs.) But what's wonderful about the Letter of 1 John is realizing that actions and beliefs both matter. What we believe can change the way we live, and how we act can help us form what we believe.

Sometimes I fear that we've gotten so far away from verbalizing and knowing what we believe in the United Church of Christ that we overemphasize performing right actions to the neglect of faith formation. Yet, given the choice of right actions or right beliefs, I would choose right actions every time. Maybe what's so compelling about 1 John is that we don't have to make that choice. We believe in Jesus' commandment to love one another and we go out and put that love into action.

Emphasizing both beliefs and actions is hard—and it's what can make Christianity so great. Because faith without works is dead. We love not just in word and speech, but in truth and action. We need orthodoxy and orthopraxy—right beliefs and right actions. For if we believe that God is love—we'll treat one another with love. And if we give love and receive love from others—we'll understand on a deeper level that God really is love. Thanks be to God. Amen.

[1] "Runner who finished marathon 20 hours after start 'did it for Boston,'" WCVB, April 21, 2015, <http://www.wcvb.com/news/runner-with-muscular-dystrophy-vows-to-finish-b...>

[2] 1 John 4:8 and 16.

[3] 1 John 3:17.

[4] United Church of Christ Constitution.