

“We Abide in Christ”

“How Shall We Live” – part 3 (umcdiscipleship.org)

1 John 3:16-24

[Title slide] *Welcome, Prayer*

For the past three weeks, we have been reading the letter of First John as part of a journey after Easter. In light of all the Bible says Jesus did for us, we have been asking ourselves, “How should we live?”

Just in case there is any confusion, it would not be correct to call this a “Dear John letter.” That’s something totally different, like a comic I saw recently: a man in front of an empty refrigerator, after receiving “Dear John letter” from his wife, laments, “I can’t believe she left me and took everything. She knows how much I hate grocery shopping.”

John, the apostle, is not leaving us. This dear, beloved disciple is showing us true love by telling us about Jesus. The only “dears” in this correspondence are to his dear friends, God’s beloved, us.

[scriptures] The Bible tells us we are all connected. Romans 12:5 teaches us that “in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others.” In Galatians 6:10, the Church is called the “household of faith.” There is no such thing as an orphan Christian.

Today I’d like us to expand on the idea of being a household. I’ve lived in plenty of different homes: my childhood home, a fraternity house, my host parents’ house in Germany. I’ve had my own apartment, even lived in an attic. Since Katja and I got married, we’ve lived in six different houses. And there were many other times when I was a guest in someone’s house.

There is a huge difference between a frat house and my own house: the privacy, the bathrooms, the food. Most importantly, the rules depend on whose home you live in.

[kids’ room] Think just about the difference between a single apartment (or that attic I lived in one summer) and a home with family. When I was by myself, I didn’t worry about confusing my laundry or sharing the bathroom. But in a household, many types of relationships come into play. You have to establish some basic rules, or the household won’t be a good place to live.

As our family grew, the rules changed. Sometimes, we simply had to improvise who cooked, who cleaned, and who stayed up all night with the puking child. Because we love each other, we do our best to serve each other.

[Grace UMC] The church is indeed like a household, with many family systems: who serves the coffee and communion, who pays the bills, who comforts the afflicted, and who preaches when the pastor is gone. Thankfully, this church has leaders who share those responsibilities, starting with our SALT – simplified, accountable leadership team. But it goes beyond those elected leaders: there are others who teach the children, lead Bible studies, play music, and run the video. It takes a village to be the church. And it works best when we are all in it together.

[Earth] The same principle holds true for our planet. How often do we treat this earth like it’s our own private apartment? We humans leave trash everywhere. We pretend our neighbors don’t exist. We forget, the earth is God’s house, too. Metaphorically, we won’t answer the door or the phone because we don’t want to be bothered. We act like we are alone. And that’s not God’s plan for us.

[scripture, people] 1 John 3:16 says, “We ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters.” No one who lives by themselves can down their life for themselves. Without relationship, there is no need for sacrifice, nor for love. It’s only when you realize how interconnected we all are that love and service become critical.

Do you know who your brothers and sisters are? Are they only your literal family? Are they the people sitting in your pew? The members and constituents of Grace United Methodist Church? Could we instead think of the people whom we interact with daily, no matter where we are? What about those who share our faith? We ought to be connected to people even in Ukraine, Russia, Israel, Palestine, and Africa.

What if we consider that the whole planet is God’s house? Then everyone becomes our brother, sister, neighbor, roommate and suite-mate, because we are co-inhabitants on this earth.

The question we are asking is, what are we willing to do for each other?

[scripture, Jesus] Again, 1 John 3:16 says, "This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us." John wants us to know what love is, and he starts with this simple fact: Jesus died for us. Everything else is based off that.

John assumes that we want to love others, and I think that's true. One thing you learn in a household, in life in general, is that you cannot force someone to be loving. You can only give love and let others receive it.

[scripture, hands] At the time of his writing, John's household, his church, was having trouble following the rules of God's household. Some were withholding their love, their compassion, the very resources God had given them to help others. In verses 17 and 18, John writes, "If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in that person? Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth." (1 John 4:17-18)

[refugees] This problem still haunts us today. The world produces more food than it needs, but human greed prevents it from be distributed evenly. Fresh water is becoming increasingly scarce, something we might not even think about in Michigan. Companies are more concerned about making a profit than reducing pollution, and they continue to destroy the environment, forcing half of the world into disastrous health crises. We humans contribute to air pollution, climate change and extinction. We have a bad habit of forgetting to lay down our lives, our wealth and ambition, so that others can simply have a fair chance to live. We are not being good guests or tenants in this home God has given us.

[scripture] So what can we do? John says, the key is "to believe in the name of [God's] Son, Jesus Christ, and to love one another as he commanded us." (1 John 3:23) Jesus says in the Gospel of John 15:4, in the English Standard version, "Abide in me, and I in you."

The word "abide" is an old-fashioned word. The original definition of abide is to live. It's where we get the word "abode," as in, "Welcome to my humble abode." To abide in Jesus means to live with him, and let him live in us.

The more common definition of abide is "obey." We can tell our children, "As long as you live in my house, you must abide by my rules." In other versions of John 15, Jesus says, "Remain in me and my love." (John 15:4,9) Abiding in Jesus

means we learn to submit to him and follow his commands. Yet the good thing is, Jesus doesn't force us to do anything. Rather, he gives us his life to compel us to follow him. His rule is actually a gift – Jesus offers no condemnation, no punishment, no “go to your room.” Instead, Jesus says, “Love as I love,” and “Obey my Father as I do.”

[family] That's the kind of household I want to live in. Not one where I'm in constant fear of punishment, worried so bad about breaking the rules that I am paralyzed. I'm talking about a household built on love, respect, and mutual service. And if we expand our circle to include the whole world, then we begin to understand the ministry we are actually called to.

[heart] Sometimes, even when we follow God, love others, and still the world doesn't change, we have guilt in our hearts. John says, our “hearts condemn us.” (1 John 3:20) How does your heart condemn you? It piles on guilt over what you did and what you didn't do. To be sure, an honest conscience is healthy. Guilt can be a force of change, if we listen and respond to it. But sometimes we find our guilt overwhelming. If we condemn ourselves, then we are no help to others.

Did you know that “broken heart” is a real medical condition? Sadness can cause resemble a heart attack, with the same symptoms as a real one. And thankfully there is a prescription: grace and forgiveness.

[scripture] John says God is greater than our burdened hearts. God's grace is always available. The forgiveness we have in Jesus is always there. 1 John 3:20 says, “God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything.”

God knows us intimately, and that knowledge is stronger than the guilt we feel. We can let Christ remove our guilt by acknowledging what he has done for us, by repenting and beginning to follow his commands instead.

Let's read verses 21-24 again:

[2 slides] “Dear friends, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have confidence before God and receive from him anything we ask, because we keep his commands and do what pleases him. And this is his command: to believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and to love one another as he commanded us.

The one who keeps God’s commands lives in him, and he in them. And this is how we know that he lives in us: We know it by the Spirit he gave us.”

This is how we live together in God’s house, the world, at peace with our brothers and sisters and fellow creatures: we must keep God’s commands. We must live to please him, not ourselves. In a spiritual sense, it turns out, you do need to clean your room, except it’s not just your room. The place where the Holy Spirit resides – abides – his home, your heart.

[cross, heart] Christianity is not a to-do list. If your faith is a bunch of “Do this, don’t do that,” that’s a bunch of doodoo. Friends, Christianity is all about relationship. That’s why our hearts don’t condemn us. Yes, I do ask my children to clean their rooms. But I still love them when they don’t. And they still love me. And when I ask them to do something later, they do. And I bless them and give them my love, my gifts. We live together and we love each other. That’s what God wants for all of us.

Let’s live in God’s house together. Let’s stop killing each other, hating each other, stealing from each other, and putting others down, exploiting them. Let’s lay down our lives for each other, keeping God’s commands, and letting the Holy Spirit live in us.

[friends at beach] What about you? Would you make a change in your life, so that someone else could live in God’s house? John says love has to be shown, actively, not just spoken about. Let me offer you just a few examples in closing.

International Neighbors meets on Thursdays at Portage United. It’s a group of multiple cultures and faiths that are creating community together.

When we give to the local church, we support mission locally and globally. Our Ministry Shares support work and mission throughout the world. UMCOR, for example, sends recovery teams to places of natural disasters. Our support is vital to their work.

Today we received an offering for Native American Ministries Sunday. Next summer, we want to take a mission team to the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota and minister there. Next Sunday, we are going to take up a collection for the Red Bird Mission in Kentucky, in one of the poorest areas of our country.

[title slide] I challenge you to think about the world as our home, our household. Each time you meet someone, you can pray for them, a fellow human, and remember we are together in God’s house. So many of our problems would be solved if we simply dropped the attitude of “This is my country, my church, my store, my restaurant. If I don’t get what I want, I’m going to go crazy.”

This world has real problems. And our church really can solve them by showing others we are really different. We follow and obey God. We love our enemies. We lay down our lives and take up our cross. When those things are true, God will transform the world through us.

Let’s pray.

Memory Verse: 1 John 3:24 (NIV)

The one who keeps God’s commands lives in him, and he in them. And this is how we know that he lives in us: We know it by the Spirit he gave us.

Reflection Questions

1. How would you describe true love? In what ways has Jesus set before us an example of true love?
2. What are the most important commands of God? How well do we follow them?
3. What does it mean to have “your heart condemn you?” What does it mean for God to forgive you and speak grace into your life?
4. Whom have you overlooked and struggled to show compassion to? How can you share the Christ’s love better?
5. Have you asked God to forgive you? Have you felt the joy of being called a child of God?
6. Name one way you can be more obedient and follow God’s commands in order to please him.