

# THE LOOK OF LOVE

## Sermon, April 25, 2021

### Texts: Acts 4:32-37; I John 3:16-24

I'd like to begin by asking a question, "Can you name that tune?" *(At this point, our Director of Music played a few bars of the 1967 Dusty Springfield hit, "The Look of Love."* <sup>1</sup> *When I asked for a show of hands from any who recognized the tune, I think only two hands were raised ... I feigned shock and asked everyone to look at the sermon title; when I "threatened" to sing a few lines, suddenly several hands went up. I then thanked our organist for going from the sublime to the ridiculous in the course of this week; earlier in the week he played a masterful recital for his Masters in Sacred Music on the world-renowned 1887 Hook and Hastings organ at the Cathedral of the Holy Cross in Boston <sup>2</sup>, performing some of the most magnificent music the world has ever produced; and today he consents to my request to play a schmaltzy pop song from the sixties that nobody seems to remember!)*

**The Look of Love** is an old Dusty Springfield tune from my younger years. The real question I'd like to ask this morning is this: "What DOES love look like?" Well, the apostle John tells us in 1 John 3:16 *(just as an aside, he also tells us in his Gospel in the familiar words of John 3:16, but we read from his Epistle, FIRST John 3, in today's reading)* - "This is how we know what love is: that Jesus Christ laid down His life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for each other." According to John, that is what love looks like. It is a love that is acted, not simply spoken. It is primarily a verb, not a noun. It is a love that responds primarily and, at times, sacrificially to the needs of others, rather than trying to make others accommodate/fit one's own needs. According to John, it is a love that is willing to give whatever it takes in order that others might have life. It is a love born of abundance rather than need, strength rather than weakness, out of desire to give simply because that is its nature. When I was in youth ministry eons ago, I'd advise teens to be wary of some suitor who says he or she "needs" you. No, you don't want someone who *needs* you; you want someone who is secure enough to love you. Someone who first and foremost wants to give to you, rather than take from you; someone who freely loves you out of an abundance rather than out of a lack *(this is really another sermon, but those who genuinely love and are loved know there's a big difference between, "I love you because I need you" and "I need you because I love you.")* The kind of love John is talking about is love that does not turn away when disappointed, when someone doesn't measure up; this love does not turn to hate or spite when rejected. And again, it is a love that is active. "THIS IS LOVE: that He laid down his life for us..." says John, who quickly adds, "and we ought to lay down our lives for each other."

The first chapters in the book of Acts depict some of the most exciting times the Christian church has ever known. At Pentecost, the Holy Spirit just blew the disciples out of the upper room, driving them out of that safe and secure sanctuary to go and speak to the people who were waiting in the community around them who were in need of the gracious message of the risen Jesus. Peter began to preach, and at the conclusion of that sermon some three thousand people decided that they, too, would call Jesus Christ their Savior and Lord. A short while later, Peter and John were preaching again, this time in the temple, and five thousand decided to join this new church.

The chief priests and the rulers of the temple were quite concerned about all of this, and they tried to stop the church. They tried to stop this burgeoning church from gathering, they tried to prevent Peter and John from even talking; they in fact banned them from speaking any more about Jesus. When Peter and John persisted in speaking about Jesus, they had them arrested and thrown in jail ... you might say they forcibly social distanced them to shut them up ... but that didn't keep the church from gathering and growing; it just made this new church all the more bold. Even the non-apostle members of this rapidly growing church were beginning to perform miraculous signs and wonders. People's lives were being dramatically changed. We read in these chapters that the Lord continued to add to their number day after day after day, that the apostles were preaching with great power, and people were being healed ... and that *everyone who had a need* was cared for. The members of the new church were so incredibly generous. No one had a need, so great was the giving.

What was it that so filled them with this incredible dynamism and this marvelous generosity? Was it that the church was filled with the Holy Spirit? Well, yes, to be sure; the Spirit was miraculously, dramatically poured out like never before at Pentecost. And yet, the Holy Spirit has never left the church *(contrary to the cynical opinion of some)*. Was it because they were performing miracles? Was that the source of all this dynamic enthusiasm and generosity in the church? Well, maybe ... but I really don't think so. The performance of miracles may help draw a crowd in the short run; the spectacular can always draw a crowd. But the Biblical reality is that people seldom come to authentic belief because they witness spectacular stuff *(witness the faithlessness of many Israelites in the wilderness years)*. For a brief while people are overwhelmed and amazed and maybe even entertained by the miraculous and the spectacular. But true belief means changing the way you live, and that ... well, that's a whole other matter. Jesus performed miracles ... and when He did, all in the amazed and impressed crowd didn't necessarily decide to join and/or follow Him; in fact, many in that crowd decided to crucify Him.

<sup>1</sup> See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tf1d65OHYXo>

<sup>2</sup> See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PWOYuTNh1fc> and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dkN2y-1VrMA>

We read in Acts 4 that all those who believed *were one in heart and mind*. One in mind: They were absolutely, totally, completely committed to the truth of God as revealed in Jesus Christ, the risen Lord. And they were one in heart: they were absolutely, totally, completely committed to each other. They knew what love looked like. They had truth and compassion; and you really can't have one without the other. You get a group of people together who are faithfully committed to Jesus Christ *and* lovingly committed to each other, and nothing can stop them.

Our brief reading from Acts 4:36-37 tells us about a man named Joseph. Joseph was so committed to his Lord and the community of believers that he went out and sold a field he owned. He then took all of the money and laid it at the apostles' feet. Joseph had probably owned this field for a long time, it may have been owned by his family for generations, and he probably had a hundred different ideas what he might do with that investment. But the text has nothing to say about him being hesitant. No, Joseph was so apparently in love with his Lord and his Lord's people, so committed to the community of believers, that he did what people always do when they are in love -- he *gave*, selflessly and generously. He knew what love looked like. It's admittedly reading between the lines, but I think the apostles could see something had happened to Joseph, that something was different about this man; something happened so transforming that it was as if this were a new man. So they went ahead and gave him a new name. They called him Barnabas, which means the Son of Encouragement. You do enough genuine giving, and you might as well change your name, because it will transform your life. It will help make you someone who is no longer always worried and preoccupied about "having enough" or "getting enough" (*as if you could ever have or get enough*) and into someone who is focused on being a *son or daughter of encouragement* for others.

One of the striking things about this new name is missed in our English translations. The Greek word "*Paraklesayus*." Barnabas means Son of *Paraklesayus*. *Paraklesayus* is the exact root word Jesus used to describe the ministry of the Holy Spirit in John 14; the Holy Spirit is the Paraclete (not parakeet), the One who draws alongside ("para-") to comfort, strengthen, encourage. The Paraclete is the Holy Spirit whose prime ministry is "*paraklesayus*", encouragement. The Holy Spirit is the Encourager ... not the Discourager, by the way. He is the One who *puff puff puff* encourages the sparking flame of faith to grow grow grow into a fire within; He never snuffs it out in a devastating *Wooosh* of indignant "Ahh, not good enough." No, that's the work of the DIS-courager, which is frankly the diabolical work of our diabolical adversary. Love encourages. Biblically, the devil is the one who discourages and accuses in his work trying to smother the growth of faith. Barnabas was a *divine encourager*, not a *diabolical discourager*. He knew what love looked like. The ministry of this "son of encouragement" was like that of the ministry of the Holy Spirit Himself. More often than not we find the encouragement of the Holy Spirit in the church through people like Barnabas. Sons and daughters of encouragement. Sons and daughters of the Spirit. Sons and daughters of God. God is a father, and like any good earthly father, He takes great delight when His children work hard to encourage one another to love and good works!

We continue to read about Barnabas from time to time throughout the rest of Acts. He continues to take very seriously this commitment to be a loving source of encouragement. He goes out on the missionary journeys with other apostles. He appears in chapter 9 as the staunch advocate and **sole encourager** of the new convert Saul (9:27), better known today as Paul. He was so committed to Paul that he stayed with him to be an encouragement to him, even when Paul was in jail. Barnabas was so committed to a young apostle named John Mark that he stayed with John Mark even when John Mark failed (*we'll look at that story in the near future*); in fact, Paul got so fed up with John Mark that he left him behind on the next mission trip. However, Barnabas didn't leave John Mark, because his calling was to be an encourager. John Mark, by the way, went on to grow and mature and develop into a key leader of the church, and he eventually authored the Gospel that bears his surname (Mark), thus touching the lives of millions, even billions, down through the centuries ... and all largely because Barnabas encouraged this young man, even when he failed, even when John Mark didn't measure up. Barnabas was so committed to the mission movement of the early church, that he just went wherever he could go to work and be an encouragement. In fact, almost every time his name appears in Acts from this point on, his name doesn't come first. It comes second. Barnabas was never the star; he was always the crucial supporting cast, the encourager.

I think one key secret revealed in the book of Acts is the key secret to having a committed, dynamic church today ... and it is not that we need more apostle Pauls. What we need are a lot more Barnabases ... sons and daughters of encouragement. Sons and daughters of the Spirit. Sons and daughters of God the Father who know what love looks like and who act accordingly; people who are willing to lay down their lives for each other, giving of their treasure, their talent, their time, giving of their hearts for the sheer joy and vital spiritual ministry of loving encouragement. I John 3:24 *"And this is his commandment, that we believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and love one another as He commanded us. The one who keeps God's commands abides in God, and God in him. And by this we know that He abides in us, by the Spirit Whom He has given us."*

And this is the Spirit of Encouragement.