

Sunday, April 29, 2012 (1 John 3:16-24)

"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?" Even some Christians rule 1 John's question out of order.

by [Wm. Michael Jinkins](#) in the [April 18, 2012](#) issue

The first thing that struck me about First Presbyterian Church in Dallas was not the imposing building where one of my longtime heroes, John Anderson, once served as senior pastor. No, the first thing that grabbed my attention that day was the church sign: "Justice is love distributed."

I turned that sentence over again and again in my mind as I made my way into the church. It was an appropriate sign for my mission that day. I had come to talk with associate pastor Bob Lively about bringing a group of young people and their adult sponsors from our church in suburban Irving to join First Presbyterian's Stew Pot ministry.

A friend had shared an article with me about the ministry's beginnings. Lively had been walking along the sidewalk in front of the church one day when he passed a homeless man sleeping at the base of the church steps. Lively walked into a colleague's office and said, "That's my Lord out there." Then he, his colleagues and congregational leaders began to ask themselves what they could do to address the problem of homelessness. Over the next few years, they initiated the Stew Pot ministry, which fed the homeless a hot meal every day and provided basic medical care and social services. Later they also offered educational and recreational programs to children and youth.

The young people from our congregation helped with these ministries, as did their parents and others in our congregation. Over the years I've noticed that many of the young people who participated in these programs have become social workers, counselors and leaders of conscience in their congregations and communities. I

think there's a direct connection between the sign I saw at First Presbyterian Church of Dallas and the vocations these young people chose as adults. They had seen justice in personal terms, as an extension of love, as a distribution of God's love, and they came to understand love as something tangible and powerful.

"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?" asks the author of 1 John. Sadly, it has become commonplace even for Christians to rule this question "out of order."

Listening to nationally broadcast political debates in the last year, many of us have heard the applause when a candidate championed capital punishment or implied that if a person cannot afford health insurance, society should just let them die. It is disappointing when some of those who applaud believe that they are representing "Christian values."

I wrote a blog post in which I argued that whatever our politics may be and whatever our economic philosophies may advocate, the call of Jesus requires Christians to care for those who are in need. I critiqued the Ayn Rand myth of individualism, an ideology that sees altruism as a con game. A respondent to that post wrote me a lengthy and energetic reply, arguing that Jesus never told us to help the poor.

As I read that reply—which was thoughtfully written and sincere—my thoughts went immediately to 1 John 3:16–24 and to passages such as Matthew 25:31–46, with the disturbing "sheep and goats" parable that is painful to read, not only because it implies that there are lasting consequences for not recognizing or responding to the face of God in those in need, but also because it strikes at the heart of our ability to know with certainty matters of such eternal consequence.

What's missing in some of the current political debate of Christian values is the value of the love of God revealed in Jesus Christ. However we frame the political, social or cultural dimensions of the challenges we face, we Christians have an obligation to act in a manner consistent with the gospel of Jesus Christ. As 1 John says: "We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another." George MacLeod, founder of the Iona Community, said: "We are to be to others what Christ has become for us."

In Martin Luther King Jr.'s 1958 essay "An Experiment in Love," he reminds us of the transformative potential of love, the creative power of love wielded as a social force, love crafted into direct, nonviolent action that can overcome hatred and violence.

Such love, he says, not only lifts up the downtrodden but can also transform oppressors into liberators. Such love "is an overflowing love which is purely spontaneous, unmotivated, groundless, and creative. It is not set in motion by any quality or function of its object. It is the love of God operating in the human heart." King paraphrases 1 Corinthians 10:24: "[It] is a love in which the individual seeks not his own good, but the good of his neighbor."

If justice is love distributed, what a difference it makes if justice flows from our congregations like a mighty rushing stream.