

Ties that bind (1 John 3:16-24; John 10:11-18; Acts 4:5-12)

A church in Oregon has a rule: no one in its membership will be in need.

by [Stan Wilson](#) in the [May 2, 2006](#) issue

Our church has an unwritten rule: we will never ignore a member's basic need. Whenever our members know of a need in the church, they call me. "Is there any money in the benevolence fund? You know Johnny got cut back on his hours, and his kids need help with school supplies." The answer is always yes. We've yet to encounter a need we couldn't fill. Another church I pastored hosted a church-wide garage sale to meet a medical need. So, even though it's an unwritten rule, I believe it to be ironclad. We will not let another member go without food or medical treatment. If a young person needs help going to school, we'll find a way. If someone's house is unlivable, we'll find them a new one or invite them into a spare room.

One Wednesday night, I asked those in our Bible study why we have never thought to make explicit what we all know to be true. Why not say it out loud? It seems like great news to me in an anxious age, when we live in fear of economic collapse or terrorist attack, and are just waiting for the housing bubble to pop or for oil production to peak. Why not make it official? Why not state out loud that no matter how bad it gets, we will be there for one another?

I know of a church that's made such a statement. The Church of the Servant King in Eugene, Oregon, has a rule that no one in its membership will be in need. The members claim that this rule has freed them in surprising ways. They work fewer hours so they can spend more time with one another; they are able to afford to work less because they know they can count on each other. Their common life looks like—well, fun.

The rest of us are busy working two jobs to a family. Our kids skip recess because they have to study for national tests. I wonder if a simple pledge never to let one another starve would loosen us up. If we knew that it's not finally up to us to secure

our future, wouldn't that free us so we could begin to spend a little more unhurried time together and with our families?

I didn't get an answer at the Bible study. In fact, the very mention of the subject seemed embarrassing, as if I had violated a taboo and uttered that which must not be spoken. I suspect that not only do we fear the future, we also fear each other. We are afraid that somebody will try to take advantage of us, afraid that we will have to expose ourselves at our most intimate, private level: our bank balance.

Unlike many of us, the writer of 1 John was not bashful or afraid. "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?" Put your money where your mouth is, John says. "Let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action." John says this plainly, as if it's obvious. If you love one another, you extend help when someone is in need.

This is a highly unusual statement for both the Gospel and the Epistles of John. When we do find Jesus giving ethical instruction in the Gospel of John, he seems to be talking only about the church. "Love one another," he says, talking about other believers. If we want to expand the message, we must go elsewhere—to Matthew if we want to learn about loving enemies, or to Luke if we want to learn about loving our neighbors.

All the more reason to pay attention when the Gospel and Epistles of John finally set theological claims aside and call us into this practice of economic sharing. To lay down one's life for another member can mean many things, but it means no less than this: to promise, so long as you are able, never to let a brother or sister go hungry.

I do not doubt that the members of my congregation love one another; I just wanted them to say it. But voicing our commitment is risky and profoundly countercultural. Our culture runs on fear and disordered desire. If we aren't hungry for something, we won't buy it. If we aren't afraid, we won't work as hard. What happens if a little congregation breaks the rules and removes the fear by promising to care for one another?

We might reveal the risen Son of God, the Good Shepherd, the one who lays down his life for his sheep.

With a living God loose in the world, we might no longer live in fear, and no longer believe that the world runs only when people look out solely for themselves. We might start to look out for one another, and violate one of the cardinal rules of our economic order.

Easter has been known to evoke robust theological claims and rogue behavior. Peter and John annoyed the rulers and elders and were tossed in jail because they taught that in Jesus there is resurrection for those locked in the fear of death.

That's what can happen when people believe that the future is not theirs to secure, but belongs in the keeping of a Good Shepherd. They begin to live without fear. "We know that we have passed from death to life because we love one another. Whoever does not love abides in death" (1 John 3:14).