

**Perfect Love**  
**1 John 4:7-18**  
**September 25 2016**

So, last Sunday was Appalachia Sunday, which meant that there was no sermon -- instead, we had kids and adults up here telling stories, wonderful stories about their experience on the Appalachia service trip last summer.

We also had some down-home banjo-picking music from three of our guys who named themselves for the occasion the Saggy Bottom Boys, but whom I inadvertently called the Soggy Bottom Boys all through worship. This is my opportunity to apologize, and I do. They were terrific, the stories were terrific, and I got to just sit up here and enjoy, with all of you.

This week I'm going to share one of the stories I would have shared if I'd been one of last week's storytellers.

This story isn't a worksite story, though there are plenty of those to tell; and it isn't a story about the people we served, though there is much to say. This story took place at midnight on Monday of that week, in the church gym where we were sleeping, at the methodist church in Rainelle, West Virginia.

Rainelle was the West Virginia town hardest hit by the deadly floods that had poured through the week before we arrived.

The floodwaters had ebbed away, but of course the ground was saturated. And so that night when the skies opened and the rains poured down again, there was no place for the water to soak into.

Our gym, I should note, was on the side of a hill.

The first sign of trouble was when the girls sleeping closest to the edge of the gym started jumping up out of bed, hollering that their sleeping bags were getting wet.

We moved them away from the wall, but a lake was forming -- water was seeping in through every opening it could find.

And while a bunch of us ran around looking for mops, one of our adult leaders, Scott Thompson, pulled on boots and headed out into what was now a deluge.

He re-emerged minutes later, soaked.

"We've gotta divert the water," he said.

"We've gotta get out there and make a dam."

I would like to be able to say that our *immediate* reaction was "let's do it, by golly!" but in fact it was a bit more like

"seriously? could we wait until after breakfast?"

But it couldn't wait.

And so it was that at midnight on the 4th of July 2016, a great many adults in pajamas and work boots were outside in the dark in a soaking rain shoveling like mad, while muddy waters came pouring down the hillside.

By the light of glowing cellphones, we dug a trench, we made a dam, we diverted the water.

We kept the mud from pouring in to where our kids were sleeping.

We also sang songs, told bad jokes, and in all honesty had a strangely good time in our cold wet pajamas.

When the sun came up the next morning, we all of course went back out to survey our creation: and there it was, quite the lovely dam, that had kept the muddy water from flooding in on us.

I tell that story because there was something wonderful about it:

there was something wonderful about seeing a whole lot of tired folks picking up shovels and working together to hold back a flood.

I also tell it because it strikes me that what we did that night is something like what we have to do all the time.

I tell it because I think that story has something to do with the scripture you just heard.

Really.

What [Mike/Olivia] just read to you was about love.

One of the most beautiful passages of the bible, from a letter that the apostle John wrote to his fellow Christians reminding them what this is all about, what this following-Christ stuff was all about.

He wrote,

God is love – and those who abide in love abide in God.

And he said this:

he said, there's no fear in love.

Perfect Love casts out fear.

*Perfect love gets rid of fear.*

I was thinking about that verse, this week.

*And* I was thinking about that night in the mud.

And I was thinking about how hard a bunch of good folks worked together to keep the mud and the floodwaters from going all over that church gym.

And I was thinking about the dam that we built.

And here's what I realized:

We are flooded, doesn't it seem somedays, we are flooded by what is fearsome --

we are inundated, overwhelmed with news of what is wrong, and what needs fixing.

And our call, our call,

is to get on up, and get on out,

and, well, **fix** it.

Hold back the waters. Build the dam.

With **love**.

Perfect love casts out fear, says John's letter.

Yes. Perfect love holds back the waters.

Our call is to meet hurt and wrong and hopelessness with **love**.

I don't mean emoticon love,

I don't mean greeting card love, warm fuzzies love.

I mean love that rolls up its sleeves

puts on its workboots,

grabs a shovel and goes out in the rain Love.

I mean *I'll sleep some other time,*

*got work to do now* Love.

I mean *somebody's gotta build that dam* Love.

Love on the move. Hardworking love.

What our people were doing in Rainelle, of course,  
was hardworking love.

Cindi Bigelow, last week, talked about driving down a street in Rainelle with  
Chuck Ellis and their crew of kids,

looking for the house that Chuck fixed last year,

and when they found it, ravaged by the floods,

they got to work, they got to work cleaning.

The work of love.

"you're my prayers answered," cried the woman who lived there to Chuck.

"You're my prayers answered."

That's working love.

Hardworking love gets out there in the world and does what needs to be done,  
hardworking love finds the hurt, and heals,

like Cindi and Chuck and their crew.

Or like our own Mike Mitri and his son Dan, who two weeks ago

went down to where folks were hurting in Louisiana,  
and they too spent a week of their lives shoveling out muck,  
wading through mud,  
rolling up sleeves and tearing down the mold.  
Sometimes hardworking love is, pretty literally,  
hard working love.

Carrying debris or re-roofing a trailer,  
shoveling gravel or framing a wall.  
Cooking up a meal for hundreds,  
making beds in a shelter,  
stacking cans in a food pantry.

That's what hard-working love looks like.,  
But, you know, hard-working love takes other forms too.  
Those floods coming at us,  
that mud, that debris,  
well, a lot of it's just plain ugly stuff.  
Hatreds old and new, prejudices old and new, intolerance, and simple  
unkindness.  
And holding that back --  
that's some tough work.  
But that kind of hard work is our call, too.  
With perfect love that casts out fear,  
with hardworking love that holds back the muddy water.  
It's needed. Oh, boy is it needed.

Here's what love that casts out fear looks like,  
here's what hardworking love looks like.  
It's love *that embraces the other*.  
Rolls up its sleeves and walks out into the muck of prejudice and prejudgment,  
and just *loves*.  
I've seen that from you, all of you.  
We live in a time when people hear the word "refugee" with fear,

but when our resettlement committee asked your help  
to get three apartments ready for families newly arriving here,  
you gave enough for twice that number.

In our Church School our children are decorating pillowcases for those homes,  
with hearts and flowers and kind words, as Marcia shares bible verses with  
them about welcoming the stranger.

In June, during Ramadan, when Muslim friends came here to break their fast  
with us as the sun went down,  
dozens of you came out to sit together with them  
in eager conversation and loving welcome.

(And the baklava was amazing, too).

That's the work of love, that's love that casts out fear,  
that's work that stems the tide of bigotry and suspicion.

Embracing love. Welcoming love.

*And it's the work of love to listen.*

I mean really listen.

I mean getting yourself to a place where you are really hearing another's hurt  
and hope and need.

There's been a lot of hurt to hear of late.

Since the last time a sermon was preached from this pulpit,  
Terence Crutcher was shot by the police beside his stalled minivan on the  
streets of Tulsa;

and in Charlotte, North Carolina, the scene of another death,  
the streets have been filled with protest and prayer,  
and anger.

The investigations may continue, but the work of love starts now.

And it is the work of love to listen,  
to listen to the voices, to *every* voice.

On the radio yesterday,  
on Weekend Edition, Scott Simon shared words

that were written by a Rebecca Lee, a teacher at the school in Tulsa where Terence Crutcher's daughter is a student.

She wrote what she wrote simply because she wanted us to *listen* -- she wanted us to hear the voices of her children.

And to do the **work** of love.

Here's some of what she wrote:

*Today at school, our staff decided we needed to press "pause" and create a space for kids to share their thoughts and feelings in response to the killing of Mr. Crutcher. I want to share with you what I experienced with my kids today. I look at the wide-eyed faces of the fifth graders surrounding me: 10 and 11 year olds, waiting to hear what I had to say. I tell them we will read a news article together about the shooting together so we can all be informed.*

*As I read out loud, the students busily highlight and underline parts that stand out to them: **Fatally shot. Hands raised. "Bad dude."** I finish and I ask them, "What are your thoughts?"*

*They answer with questions. Why did they have to kill him? Why were they afraid of him? Why does my friend have to live life without a father? What will she do at father daughter dances? Who will walk her down the aisle?*

*As the questions roll, so do the tears. Students cry softly as they speak. Others weep openly. I watch 10 year olds pass tissues to each other, to me, to our principal as he joins our circle.*

*One girl closes our group by sharing: "I wish white people could give us a chance. We can all come together and get along. We can all be united." We agree to love one another, to take care of one another. I tell each of them that I am white and I love them and they matter to me.*

*I share this story because I spent the last two years teaching kids that we write to interact with and understand the world, that our voices matter and that our voices deserve to be heard.*

*I ask that you read. I ask that you put yourself the shoes of black and brown children growing up in this world.*

*I ask that you love and love hard.*

Her work, that teacher's work, is a work of love.  
Her listening was the work of love.  
And our work is to listen, too,  
to the voices she shared, and the fear that most of us can only begin to  
imagine.  
That's hard work.  
That's hardworking love.  
That's love that changes the course of floods,  
alters the course of prejudice and fear.  
Perfect love that casts out fear.

Hardworking love embraces,  
hardworking love listens,  
and hard working love speaks, too.  
I don't need to look any further than our own young people  
to find **that** love at work.  
Down in Charlotte, Kelly Milicia, junior deacon of this church,  
is at school,  
and at witness to what has unfolded around her.  
And on Facebook she wrote this:  
*I pray for the world, for all the evil and hate to stop  
and for there to be more love between every person, every race, every gender,  
every religion.*  
Then she put two quotes --  
one from Martin Luther King,  
one from Jimi Hendrix.  
"Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive  
out hate; only love can do that."  
and "When the power of love overcomes the love of power the world will know  
peace".  
Speaking up like Kelly did is the work of love, too, the *hard* work of love.



All of this, all of this, is what it is to do the work of love,  
the work that stops the floods,  
that turns back the waters of hurt and hate.

All of this:

love in action, love that embraces, love that listens,  
love that speaks up and speaks out.

This is that perfect love that casts out fear.

This is that love that will turn the tide.

John wrote this in his letter, too.

He said "no one has seen God, no one can see God --  
but if we love -- *if we love* --

God lives in us."

If we love -- with a love that rolls up its sleeves and wades on out --  
we are God's presence in a hurting world.

We are God's face in a world that longs to see it.

Let's get to work. Amen.