

- When it comes time to show our love to someone, we often find ourselves searching for just the right words to convey what we feel. Most of us believe that words, even someone else's words, can help us express our deepest affections. And so on days such as Mother's Day, we choose very carefully the kind of message we want to send. Thank goodness for companies like Hallmark, who are committed to making it as easy as possible for us to express that perfect thought for the occasion with their amazing array of greeting cards. Their premise as Mother's Day approaches each year is that with just a little effort, you're bound to find a message suitable for any mother, any age, with any kind of personality. If you don't have time to shop for the perfect card at the mall, I just learned that Hallmark has now produced software which will enable you to print one up on your own computer. Or if that takes too much effort, I heard this week about getacard.com, that allows you to personalize, order, and send an actual paper Mother's Day card without leaving your desk chair. Now if you missed out on even that convenient option and you still need a way to tell Mom that you love her, hopefully your mother is online and you can send her an electronic card before the day is over. It may seem a little last-minute, but, oh well, it's the thought that counts. Thanks to the Internet, it's easier than ever to tell someone we love them. If it's simply a matter of getting the word out, we're learning to do that faster and more efficiently than ever before. But we've also learned through the internet that words without a face or a body attached to them can be a little misleading. Do you know anyone who got hit by the I love you virus last week, the one that affected millions of computers around the world and rang up a bill estimated to run as high as \$10 billion dollars in lost work hours? Thousands of people were just sitting down to open their email messages one morning when they noticed the subject heading, I love you, which they couldn't resist opening. But it wasn't long until they discovered that this enticing message harbored a potent virus with the ability to destroy multiple files which also spread its deadly venom to all the addresses in their address books. What seemed so innocent proved to be deadly in reality. Some of us had to learn the hard way that what looks good in print or on your computer screen isn't always what it seems to be. Don't ever trust the words, I love you, when they are disconnected from a real person that you can see and know. The thought that counts may not be so good for the person who receives it. I'm intrigued that so many people fell for this particular virus. Somehow the words I love you, more than most, are words we want to hear and we want to believe, no matter what the source. But as the the author of our epistle lesson from 1st John points out, words on their own can never be the proof of love. "Little children, let us love not in word or speech, "but in truth and action," he writes. Words can manipulate and speeches can be misleading. We all know how speech writers work for politicians, and they get paid huge sums of money to put just the right spin on the things they seem to be saying but don't really mean to say. Or if you've ever fallen for a phony love letter, you know the difference between flowery words and loving actions. It is possible not to say we love and still express our love through actions, but it isn't possible to say we do love and not confirm it then with our deeds. This exposition in John on the nature of love takes place as part of a larger discussion in that epistle about the importance of genuine love among Christians. After a split in the Johannine community, the author of this epistle is focusing on how its members are to follow Christ, or more specifically, how to love. He beckons his readers to remember the message they have heard from the beginning, that they should love one another, and then act accordingly. Their model should be Christ himself who laid down his life for others. Likewise, they are to lay down their lives for one another. To

make his point clearer, John presents us with a contrast, as he often does in his writings, using examples such as light versus darkness and life versus death. And so to clarify what love looks like, he spent several verses in this same chapter describing what hate looks like. And as his example, he chooses Cain, son of Adam and Eve, who murdered his brother, Abel. You may recall from Genesis 4 that each brother presents an offering to God. But for some reason God considered Abel's offering to be acceptable, while Cain's was not. Out of jealousy, Cain murders his own brother. Now I ask you, out of all the murderers in the world, why would John pick out Cain as his example? I think the reason is that Cain's behavior is a prototype of all that has unfolded in human history after him. Though it was his parents who ate the forbidden fruit and were expelled from the Garden of Eden, it was Cain who first experienced the pangs of jealousy. He was the first to know the meaning of such intense hatred toward his own brother that he could kill him. And every person born since then has faced a similar temptation. If not the temptation to murder, then at least the barrage of feelings like jealousy, anger, self-centeredness, that can lead to hate rather than love. John sees a very strong connection between such feelings and even murder when he writes, "All who hate a brother or sister are murderers." In other words, wherever hate is, murder is always the possibility. And in the eyes of God, even turning down that path is the same thing as picking up the ax like Cain and bludgeoning your brother to death. This is what Jesus was trying to tell us in the Sermon on the Mount when he said, "You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, "You shall not murder, and whoever murders "shall be liable to judgment. "But I say to you that if you are angry "with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment. "And if you insult a brother or sister, "you will be liable to the council. "And if you say, 'you fool,' "you will be liable to the hell of fire." And so I ask you this morning, is there anyone here who is without sin? This weekend a good deal of attention is being focused on the topic of murder as thousands of people gather in Washington, D.C. for the Million Mom March. The idea for this march came about last August when a woman named Donna Dees-Thomases was watching frightened nursery school children on television. She watched them holding hands as they were being led away in a line from a shooting spree at the North Valley Jewish Community Center. As a mother of young children herself, Dees-Thomases felt she could not remain silent any longer about the 5,000 children who die each year as a result of gunfire in this country. Within a week of the tragedy at the Jewish Community Center, Dees-Thomases had reserved the mall in Washington for Mother's Day 2000 and started calling people. And she found that many, many others were equally concerned. As the organizers of the Million Mom March got going, they developed a website which has become the repository for hundreds of stories about first-hand experiences with gun violence. When you have the time and the energy to cry your way through some of these accounts, I recommend you take a look at www.millionmommarch.org and click on Tapestry. You'll read there about toddlers being caught in crossfire, six-year-olds gunned down at school, teenagers shot while shopping at the mall or standing on the street corners, grandmothers murdered on vacation. The stories go on and on and on. Once I started crying as I was reading these stories, I could hardly stop, so heartbreaking they were. I couldn't help thinking that for each death or injury there was some parent, some spouse, some child, some sibling, friend, or neighbor, left standing by the graveside to deal with the anguish of their loss. It was amazing to me to read these stories and to think how a single bullet just keeps on killing. And so thousands of people, including several hundred from the Triangle area, are converging on Washington at this very hour. They will protest the murdering, the hatred, the violence, the callousness of the NRA, and the indifference of the rest of us to what has become standard fare on the evening news. As we reflect on John's words to us, we recognize just how far removed we are from Jesus' commandment to love. Though there isn't a thing that you or I can do

to bring back those who have been murdered, we can protest the lovelessness of our society and all that it stands for. If we persist in glorifying self, wealth, power, and status at the expense of learning to give ourselves for others, very little will change to improve this grim situation. When we cave in ourselves to jealousy or rage, spitefulness, or malicious gossip, it ends in murder. If not physical, then emotional. It becomes a kind of character assassination, where we wish the person wasn't around any longer, and we can undermine his character and denigrate her worth. Thus, we all understand too well the dynamics of murder and the attitudes that Jesus has described which accompany it. The story of Cain murdering his own brother may be ancient, but it remains chillingly relevant to our own community in our own time. The contrast of all this with Christian love, as described in today's lesson, couldn't be clearer. Jesus, as the prime example of this type of love, laid down his life for us. That's how we know what love is. Cain showed us that the nature of hate is to take life. Jesus showed us that the nature of love is to surrender life, even when the recipient of that love isn't particularly deserving. It wasn't that God was somehow responding to our love for him when Christ died for us on the cross. Far from it. Rather than loving Jesus, most who met him were totally opposed to him. So much so that there were only a handful of people who accepted him for who he was. The rest rejected him. Even when he did the amazing things he did, like performing miracles. Even when he fed and healed them and resurrected them from the dead, all the rest could do was to demand his execution. And yet, Jesus submitted willingly to his death, so those very people could be forgiven. This is the good shepherd, who lays down his life for his flock, as our gospel lesson describes him. This is the love that is spelled out in action. It forgives over and over and over, without retaliation. And when we recognize that this is the type of love God has for us and allowed it to transform us deep within, all we can do in response is to open ourselves to loving others in the same way. So what does this love look like in practical terms? To say we ought to lay down our lives for one another doesn't mean lying down on the nearest train track just to prove how much we love each other. When John gets very specific about this in verses 17 and 18 of chapter three, he asks, "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? "Little children let us love, "not in word or speech, but in truth and action." In other words, an expression of sympathy for a hungry man is not love, but giving him something to eat is. Getting a spiffy Mother's Day card to your mother on time isn't love. But sitting down with her to find out what she needs and then responding to them by giving her needs priorities over your own is love. In order to love, we share our resources. We share our time and our energy. We make a decision about how we should act, rather than waiting to see how we feel. We are willing to set aside our carefully laid plans to reach out to another person. Perhaps you've been scheduled to take an airplane flight that was fully booked but then got canceled, and you were told that less than half the people holding reservations would be able to get flights out on that same day. Did you step aside to give someone else the option of getting a seat, or were you among the ones racing to the next gate to make sure you were not inconvenienced by the delay? It's happened to me before. And I'm not going to tell you how I responded. Maybe for some of us, learning to lay down our lives for another starts with laying down our calendars, so we can actually make room for other people and their needs, which don't always present themselves on schedule, after all. Think of the good Samaritan, who unexpectedly encounters the Jewish man in the ditch, but then went out of his way to bandage up his wounds and deliver him to a safe place, not only leaving money for the inn keeper to cover his expenses, but promising also to pay whatever else was needed when he came back. Based on the history of the Jews and the Samaritans, the expected outcome for this story would have been for the Samaritan to finish off the job which the robbers had already started. But instead,

without saying so much as a word about loving the man, the Samaritan showed his love for his neighbor through his actions. One of the difficulties we have in thinking about love is that the very concept of love has been hijacked by popular culture. We turn to places like Hollywood or the Backstreet Boys to tell us what love should look like. We imagine that it always involves chocolates and flowers, or at least flowery words of endearment, resulting in some kind of heightened emotional state that lasts forever. But this is the kind of love that is often grounded in self-enhancement and self-centeredness. "These are my needs and I expect you to meet them," is often the motivation for such love. And as we learned from so-called crimes of passion, when those needs aren't being met, the feeling soon turns to violence and hate, which is really only a hair's breadth away from love, because hate wants to take life and love wants to surrender it. The kind of love that calls us to surrender ourselves is much more down to earth than what Hollywood is telling us about. Anyone who has ever raised a child or nursed a sick friend or relative or lived in a marriage for more than even a few weeks knows about this kind of love. Love involves giving ourselves in practical ways. Ways that respond to the needs and desires of the recipient more than the giver. Remember John's words? "Let us love, not in word or speech, "but in truth and action." In truth, because such love doesn't pretend. It gets to the bottom of a problem and fixes it. And in action, because that's the way we give ourselves away to the ones we love. I wonder if this is the point where I should ask how you're feeling? My guess is that quite a few of you are feeling guilty, because we know we haven't been doing any of this very well. And quite a few more of us are feeling pressured, because it sounds so difficult. Try and remember that God's love is good news. It's about grace, the love that God gave to us first and not about our own guilt and pressure. Even Cain received a mark on his forehead as a sign of God's ongoing care and protection after he murdered his brother. As John writes in his letter, "By this we will know that we are from the truth "and will reassure our hearts before him "whenever our hearts condemn us." In other words, just as we start feeling like failures, because no one has the energy or the resources to always love the way we should, God gives us the reassurance we need. "God is greater than our hearts," John writes, "and he knows everything. "We receive from him whatever we ask, "because we obey his commandments "and do what pleases him. "This is the work of the Holy Spirit, "the guide and the advocate Jesus promised to send "to be with us after his ascension into heaven. "The spirit, you see, empowers us to do "what God commands and reassures us "that God is with us when we do it, "as as sign of God's faithfulness to us." Friends, we testify to the world that we are Jesus' disciples by how we love one another. If we indulge in hate, disobedience, mere profession of love in words without deeds to support them, then we are the hypocrites that the world is so quick to accuse us of being. It isn't the thought that counts, but the way we live our lives. The test of the sincerity of our faith is to walk in the footsteps of Christ, who gave up his life for us, that we might receive the gift of eternal life with him.