

you change a successful brand. You might end up breaking something that doesn't need fixing.

So what is the Apostle John up to here? For starters, he wants to put a human face on the commandment to love one another, a specific face, the face of Jesus. *We know love by this*, he says to his brothers and sisters in Christ, *that he laid down his life for us* (v. 16). John knows that the problem with the love commandment is that it can easily become sickeningly sweet, with people enjoying the pleasant taste of tender emotions and charitable thoughts. So he changes the formula to include the bitter sacrifice of Christ on the cross.

Such a change of ingredients can actually change our behavior. *We ought to lay down our lives for one another*, insists John, following the example of Jesus (v. 16). Under this new formula, sacrificial giving becomes a central part of the Christian life, one that simply cannot be denied. John asks his followers, *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?* (v. 17). Good question. Where *do* you see God's love in a person who won't help? You don't. It's just not there. Love is seen in action, not in words.

John summarizes his new formula with the words *Believe in the name of [God's] Son Jesus Christ and love one another* (v. 23). He links belief in Jesus with love for one another, knowing that the clearest example of love is the sacrificial life and death of Christ. The result of this new formula is a closer connection to God, one in which *all who obey his commandments abide in him, and he abides in them* (v. 24). John says that we'll know that God lives in us *by the Spirit that he has given us* (v. 24). The new link between belief and love create a new kind of life for us. A Christ Life.

Oddly enough, Coca-Cola has decided to change its formula once again, offering a new version called "Coca-Cola Life." It was launched in Argentina before being test-marketed in the United Kingdom, and may soon have its debut in the United States. People are wondering if it is healthier than regular Coke, since its formula contains a sweetener from

natural sources. "Coca-Cola Life" will get its sweetness from the stevia plant, which is derived from a plant in the chrysanthemum family. Instead of regular Coke's 140 calories per can, Life will have 89. Coca-Cola will soon be offering "Life" to Americans. Jesus has been offering Life to Christians for quite some time.

Throughout the Gospel of John, we hear that promise of life. In fact, the gospel was written *so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life* (John 20:31). The gospel begins with the Word of God taking the human form of Jesus, and we're promised that *what has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people* (John 1:3-4). Belief. Life. Light. Put these ingredients together, and you can see that a new formula is beginning to emerge.

John goes on to tell us that *God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life* (John 3:16). So now love is in the mix. As well a kind of life that extends beyond the grave — eternal life. Describing himself, Jesus says, *I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life* (John 8:12). *I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly* (John 10:10). *I am the way, and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me* (John 14:6). Life in his name. Eternal life. The light of life. Abundant life. The way, the truth and the life. Life, life, life.

But Christ Life, not the same old formula. It's a new one based on believing in Jesus and loving one another. Of course, not everyone is going to be happy with this new brand. Changes can be met with fierce resistance, such as occurred with New Coke 30 years ago. Christ Life is not going to be for everyone. But for those who dare to sip this new flavor, abundant life awaits.

Mark Bustos sipped this new life. He's a hair stylist at an upscale salon in Manhattan, but on his day off he gives free haircuts to homeless people. The response has been enthusiastic, and the recipients tremendously grateful. One man was so inspired by his transformation that he asked, "Do you know anyone that's hiring?" Free haircuts: that's

love in action. A new life in Christ lived out for all to see. A life transformed by the love of Jesus, moving outward to transform other lives.

Love in action: it's a lesson our congregation knows well. You can't go anywhere in Fergus Falls without finding a Federated member hard at work – putting love into action – serving on a board of directors or helping to feed our community or trying to make life a little sweeter for our neighbors. But we can do more. I challenge you to look around you today and see how you can put love into truth and action. Translate your faith into deeds. Make your words ring true by what you do. When people look at us, I want them to see the face of Christ. When people look at us, I want them to say, "That's a community that lives out its faith in Jesus."

For our graduating seniors, I challenge you, too. As you are being transformed and beginning a new phase of your life, I challenge you to make it a new life in Christ. Live lives of integrity. Speak the truth in love. Act on your beliefs. Be the face of Christ in the world.

Believing in Jesus and loving one another draws us closer to God and one another, and allows us actually to *abide in God*. To abide is to live or to dwell in something — to accept, observe and follow a particular path. So when we believe in Jesus and love one another, we abide in God and God abides in us. *And by this we know that he abides in us*, says John, *by the Spirit that he has given us* (v. 24). So give it a try. You have nothing to lose, and a new life to gain.

Sources:

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Not the Same Old Formula

Sunday, April 26, 2015

The Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

1 John 3:16-24

You shall love your neighbor as yourself (Leviticus 19:18). That's what God said to Moses and the people of Israel. As far as formulas go, it's terrific. For thousands of years, it has worked well in a variety of forms in most of the world's religions. Jews believe that "you shall love your neighbor as yourself." Hindus affirm that "one should not behave toward others in a way which is disagreeable to oneself." Buddhists say that you should "hurt not others in ways that you yourself would find hurtful." And Muslims believe that "no one of you is a believer until he desires for his brother that which he desires for himself."

There's nothing secret about this formula. Even Jesus endorsed it when he made it a part of his great commandment. "Love the Lord your God," said Jesus, and "love your neighbor as yourself" (Matthew 22:37, 39).

But surprisingly, in the first of his New Testament letters, the Apostle John offers a new recipe: *this is [God's] commandment, that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another* (v. 23). Believe in Jesus. Love one another. Not the same old formula.

In recent years, companies have learned how dangerous it is to change the ingredients of a successful brand. Exactly 30 years ago, in April 1985, Coca-Cola changed its formula and introduced a product called "New Coke." The response was overwhelmingly negative, and within three months the original formula was back on the market.

Just how bad was it? The company hotline received 1,500 calls a day, almost four times what they usually logged. Psychiatrists listened in on calls and heard people talking as though they were grieving the death of a family member. Coca-Cola learned a valuable lesson: Be careful when