

Love is a Verb

I John 3:16-24, Psalm 23, John 10: 1-5, 11-15

Good Shepherd Sunday, April 25, 2021

Farmville Baptist Church

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It's been a rough week, hasn't it? In our own church family, Sandy's mother and Chuck had surgeries, and Cecil spent several days in the hospital, our prayer list is full of others we are lifting up to God. COVID has spiked several places around town, and countries like France, Brazil, and India are seeing some of their darkest days so far in the pandemic. Even as the verdict came down in the George Floyd case, national attention turned to at least four other police shootings in the last two weeks. The National Mall in Washington DC and the courthouse in MN remain surrounded by concrete barriers and razor wire, closely guarded by armed men in women in full tactical gear. The list can go on and on this morning. I can't think of another point in my lifetime when folks need loving care, can you?

The Good News of the gospel this morning is that Jesus is our Good Shepherd. He is with us, willingly and lovingly providing exactly what we need. We were reminded of that in our psalm lesson this morning, "The Lord is my shepherd, I have everything I need." The gospel text for this morning comes from John chapter 10, where Jesus describes himself as the Good Shepherd. Here those words now: ² The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. ³ The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. ⁴ When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. ⁵ They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers. ¹¹ "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. ¹² The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away, and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. ¹³ The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. ¹⁴ I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, ¹⁵ just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep.

Thanks be to God that Jesus is not an hourly employee, just punching the clock and biding his time until payday. Thanks be to God that Jesus knows us, and loves us, and calls us by name, and that He remains true to His calling, even if it will cost him his life.

This doesn't mean that everything will be easy ó we don't always get to rest in green pastures beside quiet waters ó the wolves of the pandemic and violence and injustice still seek to devour us. But the Good Shepherd promises that although we walk through these very darkest valleys, he is not only with us, but that He is actively pursuing us.

We see this pursuit of us in the parable of the lost sheep where Jesus leaves the ninety-nine to go and find the one who is lost. And what happens when the sheep is found? There is great rejoicing in heaven! Friends, that it is good news for our weary souls this morning. (PAUSE)

It should be no surprise to us that today's scriptures also come with a challenge. The unknown author of 1 John lays it out very plainly for us. "We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us ó and we ought to lay down our lives for one another." All of those things that we just heard that Jesus does for us ó we are called to do for our brothers and sisters. We can't be part-time employees who show up out of obligation and grudgingly do our jobs. No, we are called to be all in this love business. Love is a verb.

When we hear language about laying down our lives, we think of martyrs don't we? A number of the disciples were martyred for their faith. In modern times, Abraham Lincoln, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Archbishop Oscar Romero - just to name a few, all laid down their lives for others in the pursuit of justice and equality. Laying down our lives may mean physical death for some of us as well. If we stand beside victims of hate and injustice, we might be next. If we sign up to protect and defend our country ó whether it's in the armed forces, or through serving as a police officer or fire fighter ó the next bomb or bullet may find us, the next call may be our last. (PAUSE) If we're honest, we'd like an easier assignment wouldn't we?

Well, most of us will get a different kind of assignment, but I can't guarantee that it will be much easier. You see, more often laying down our lives means living for others, not dying for them. Let me say that again. More often than not, laying down our lives means living for others, not dying for them. As Christians, laying down our lives should be our orientation every day, self-sacrifice should be ordinary, not extra-ordinary. The

author of I John is clear about this too. He writes, “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? Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.” Laying down our lives means putting others first and living for the good of others. It means allowing God’s love to reorient us. You see, when God creates saving faith in our hearts, God creates ACTIVE love – we cannot receive one without the other. But that’s not always easy. One woman named Lauretta put it this way, “I know I’d die for Christ. If I were put in front of a firing squad and commanded to renounce Christ or die, I know I’d say ‘Shoot me!’ That would be easy. The hard part is *living* for Christ, not dying for him.” She is right. One huge, heroic act would be easier than a lifetime of little daily decisions, especially when it may take a lifetime to discover that the promises of God were worth the “no’s” we said to ourselves and to the world each day. The good news is that we don’t have to do this on our own. I John promises us that God gives us what we need in order to do what God calls us to do.

So what does laying down our lives look like? For a 51 year old Starbucks barista, it meant donating a kidney to a regular customer. One morning, 55-year-old Annamarie Ausnes stated during a talk with the barista that she needed a kidney transplant. The only problem was that her husband and son were not matches. Without hesitation, the barista offered to have a blood test to see if she matched the customer, and she was a perfect match. What greater love has no one, than they lay down their life for a friend.

Often our sacrifices aren’t life threatening, but they are significant. There are stories like this that we hear every time we have Olympic games. There are stories we hear anytime a successful athlete, artist, musician, (or just about any person who has accomplished anything) is asked about *how they got here*. It’s the story of the people they couldn’t have “done this without.” “*I wouldn’t be here without the support of my parents.*” “*I couldn’t have done any of this without the support of my coach.*” “*I can’t imagine this day without the amazing, sacrificial love of my family over all these years.*”

And they are compelling stories! Can you imagine getting up at 4:00 am every morning for years, to drive your child to swim practice? Then there is the untold financial sacrifice to provide your child with the training, the equipment, the medical bills... so they have an opportunity to develop a gift into a skill capable of competing at such a high level. The tears, heartbreak, fear, and sheer emotional exhaustion when failure and

injury inevitably happen. All of that, and more, *for years*. What would motivate a person to sustain that level of self-sacrifice? The answer, of course, is easy. It's *Love*. This is what love does. And we don't just see it in sports. Any place we see a person serving, giving, supporting, cheering, sacrificing, *working tirelessly* for the benefit of someone else- that is Love ó that is laying down our lives.

Sometimes the sacrifices we make for others come back to us. During the 2003 Tour De France, Lance Armstrong took a severe tumble off his bike. It occurred when a race fan was leaning over the course barrier to get a better view, and a plastic bag in that person's hand snagged Armstrong's handlebars. He went sprawling onto the street. His closest competitor at the time was Jan Ullrich and he was only 15 seconds behind. This was Ullrich's perfect chance to take the lead. But Ullrich did something non-cyclists might have trouble understanding. He stopped and halted the competition while Armstrong got to his feet, checked his bike, and began peddling. At the end of that stage, Armstrong had extended his lead from 15 seconds to 67 seconds, and he went on to win the tour that year.

Waiting for a fallen competitor is not a rule in bicycle racing. It is, however, part of an unwritten code of etiquette that cyclists observe. Perhaps one thing that caused Ullrich to honor that code is the fact that two years earlier in the 2001 Tour de France, it was he who had suffered a bad crash. At that time, it was Lance Armstrong who stopped the race, and waited while Ullrich recovered and remounted his bike. Sometimes what we lay down comes back to us, but it's no guarantee and it shouldn't influence our willingness to give ourselves away.

In the season of Easter, Episcopal priest Michael Marsh reminds us that whenever we lay down our life for another we proclaim that resurrection is not just an event in the past. It is a present reality. Laying down our life makes Jesus's resurrection tangible and real. The only reason we can ever lay down our life for another is because Jesus first laid down his life for us. The shepherd never takes his sheep somewhere he is unwilling to go. He never asks of his sheep something he is unwilling to give.ⁱ

The opportunities to provide this kind of love are everywhere. You don't have to go far. They are the family and friends we see everyday. They are the people of this family of faith and of this town. They are the strangers who pass through our lives. They are the anonymous ones talked about as issues of poverty, hunger,

homelessness, and education. The opportunities for laying down life love are not just circumstances. They are people, human beings created in the image and likeness of God.

We need only be present, open our eyes, listen, and pay attention to know how and where love asks us to lay down our life for another. Laying down our life is not, however, the end of life. It wasn't for Jesus, nor will it be for us. It is, rather, the beginning of a new life, a more authentic life, a life that looks a lot like Jesus' life. It is the life where we hear the voice of the good shepherd call our name and we follow where he leads. It's remembering that love is a verb.

Start Close In

Start close in,
don't take the second step
or the third,
start with the first
thing
close in,
the step
you don't want to take.

Start with
the ground
you know,
the pale ground
beneath your feet,
your own
way to begin
the conversation.

Start with your own
question,
give up on other
people's questions,
don't let them
smother something
simple.

To hear
another's voice,
follow your own voice,

wait until
that voice becomes an
intimate private ear
that can really listen
to another.

Start right now
take a small step
you can call your own
don't follow
someone else's
heroics, be humble
and focused,
start close in,
don't mistake
that other
for your own.

Start close in,
don't take
the second step
or the third,
start with the first
thing
close in,
the step
you don't want to take.

- David Whyte

ⁱ Michael Marsh, "A Laying Down Life Kind Of Love," <https://interruptingthesilence.com/2012/04/29/a-laying-down-life-kind-of-love-a-sermon-on-1-john-316-24-and-john-1011-18-easter-4b/>