

## *Laying Down Our Life*

John 10:11-16 NRS <sup>11</sup> "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. <sup>12</sup> 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. <sup>13</sup> The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. <sup>14</sup> I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, <sup>15</sup> just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. <sup>16</sup> I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd.

1 John 3:16-18 NRS <sup>16</sup> We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us-- and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. <sup>17</sup> 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? <sup>18</sup> Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.

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In verse 16 of the gospel lesson, the phrase that there will be "one flock and one shepherd" confronts us in our denominationalism. It challenges our dividing and splintering. When Cathy and I went to Hungary in 1995 on a mission trip, we quickly realized that we had much to learn from the Christians we met there. One striking lesson was the wide range of belief that existed in the Reformed Church of Hungary. Those with very narrow beliefs coexisted with those with much broader interpretations of scripture and how to live a Christian life. In fact, they were shocked by how easily Christians in the United States will divide and form new denominations. In John's gospel, people who see, hear, and believe in Jesus all belong to the community. The door is open wide for the outcasts, the sinners, the lepers, the women, the Samaritans, the tax collectors. Jesus didn't exclude people based on status, or bloodline, or their physical condition. He embraced those who were outcast, oppressed, and overlooked. The work of gathering the flock belongs to Jesus and to God. We are simply to provide a space where all are welcome. We need to understand that all people who confess Christ and try to follow the path of Christ are members of the same flock.

Jesus calls himself "the good shepherd." We can think of good as implying "good enough" but in the Greek it means so much more than that. The word *good*, to hear it in its full Greek meaning, means right, proper, honorable, and beautiful. *Good* implies that which is orderly, sound, noble, ideal, a model for others, that which is true, competent, faithful, and praiseworthy. Think of it as, "The Great Example of Most Excellent Shepherding."

We have a romantic view of shepherds. But the Bible has many images of shepherds who were not good shepherds. Rulers of the people are often described as shepherds, but in Isaiah 56, Jeremiah 10, and Ezekiel 34 those who led Israel were called shepherds, yes, but bad and evil shepherds because of how they neglected and abused the people they ruled. The leaders of Israel were often condemned by the prophets because they were bad shepherds of their people.

On the one hand, because Jesus was both divine and fully human, we can comprehend how Jesus knew exactly what it was like to be a sheep, and what it was like to be snatched by the wolf and killed. Remember, Jesus had been poor. He had lived in the backwaters of the occupied territory of Palestine. He had been seized, convicted in a kangaroo court, and executed in a way that was designed to be torture. So, having been a sheep, we can see how he could be an empathetic shepherd.

But, on the other hand, have we romanticized the image of Jesus as the good Shepherd because we are unfamiliar with all that it means to shepherd? A shepherd's life wasn't picturesque. It was dangerous; it was menial work; it was risky. This isn't leadership as control or power. This isn't about recognition or fame. It's an image of servant leadership, leadership by doing rather than domination, leadership by example more than by force. For Jesus to speak of leadership in terms of "I am the good

shepherd” would be a slap in the face to the religious elite of that day - and far too often - to religious leaders today.

Next, let us take a look at today’s passage in the letter known as First John. Then, we’ll examine what the two texts have in common. Many experts believe that First John was written around A.D. 100 - written in response to a group that had left the church because they really emphasized Christ's divinity much more than his humanity. First John insists that that position undermines the teachings of Jesus and the example of Christ’s life. If we emphasize the divinity of Jesus and neglect his humanity, then we call into question the depth of Jesus sacrificial love. After all, if he only really appeared to be human, then he really only appeared to suffer. And if he only appeared to suffer, then he really only appeared to love. If that is the case, then we have little example or motivation for suffering love ourselves. If Jesus got a free pass on pain then we have little motivation to endure any pain that love might call for us to endure. If Jesus only appeared to be human, then we can write off all of his actions as things than divinity can do, but humans cannot.

Both the passage in the Gospel of John, and the scripture from the epistle First John, speak of laying down one’s life for others. How do we do that? We use expressions such as, “Jonas Salk devoted his life to finding a vaccine for polio. Mother Theresa gave her life to helping the poor. Jane Goodall has given her life to the study of chimpanzees in the wild.” To lay down our lives is not meant as a grand challenge to be heroic Christians, but instead is an everyday commandment for ordinary Christians. The Christian life is a life laid down for others, a life built on self-sacrifice. It’s a life lived with Christian love, which often means going where we do not have to go, and suffering what we could otherwise avoid. We lay down our lives by putting others first. We lay down our lives when we live for the good of others, when we make time for others, when we set aside normal human desire to live for our own narrow interests, and instead, allow the love of God to turn us toward the needs of others. Conversely, when we close our hearts to someone in need, we are also closing our hearts to God. Believing in Christ means believing that Christ saves us by making us more and more like himself. We cannot believe in Jesus without believing in love, and we cannot believe in love without acting with love. John gives us no room to wiggle on this. Jesus was the very love of God in human flesh, and Jesus is always present in our acts of love toward others.

Laying down one's life for people in this passage is simply a matter of responding to people in need, not dying for people in need, but giving them what they need. In the 1960s in New Orleans, a small black girl, Ruby Bridges, went to school and sat alone in a classroom for one year in order to integrate a public school. The sacrifice of her own comfort and security made a better learning environment for other children who followed her. In verse 17 we are asked, how does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees her brother or sister in need and yet refuses help? Our eyes must be connected to our heart, and when needs are visible to us, then, if we open our heart to meet those needs, we are laying down our life.

There are stages in the process of laying down our life for others. First, we must be aware of others and their needs. Awareness becomes even more acute with each of our senses that is involved. Hearing of suffering can make us aware. Seeing the suffering sharpens our impression. Many of those who worked in New Orleans after Katrina talked of the smell of the disaster. The more aware we are, the greater our concern. We feel pity and we want to show mercy. And so, we begin to give. The easiest gift is money. Whether we give a dollar or we give many dollars, the gift of money only requires the time to reach into our wallet or to write a check – and then we can return to our day and our life. Giving time requires more. In the overscheduled and frantic pace of our lives, time is often a commodity that is difficult to find. But as we give time, we learn more about the need, we see more of the pain, we understand the suffering at an ever deeper level and we come to care more and more. After having invested our money, we invest our time, and that can lead to investing our love. And the more you invest your love in something, the more you will invest all aspects of your life in it.

This is a logical and linear understanding of laying down our lives: Learn of need, care about the need, give a bit of money, then give some time, caring evolves into loving, and loving begins to occupy a larger portion of your life. That's a straight line from learning to significant loving involvement.

But it's not very effective, really. And I was reminded of that this week. It's been said that, "You can act your way into a new way of feeling easier than you can feel your way into a new way of acting." And that is so true! When you greet people and hand them a plate of food at a Meal of Grace over at the food pantry, you see the face and hear the voice of hunger. Your understanding changes from "those other people" to "that person right here in front of me." When you sit and listen to a homeless person tell you of the hope that has been crushed in their life - and the faint dreams they have for today and maybe tomorrow, they become a real person instead of a faceless figure pushing a grocery cart. When you shovel the mud out of a home that's been flooded, you see the demolished life and the ruined family memories in every shovel full. It is in the doing, in the laying down of your life to help raise up the life of another, that you find real knowledge, real understanding, and real meaning. It is in laying down our lives that we find abundant life, purposeful life, life with eternal value and worthiness. Amen.

Sisters and Brothers,  
It is in laying down our lives  
that we find abundant life, purposeful life,  
life with eternal value, life worth living!.

In American society today, we tend to romanticize love. We think of it as something that comes from within us, and gives us a wonderful warm fuzzy feeling, something beyond ordinary life. In all of this, love is about how we feel. First John, by comparison, insists that God's love is self-giving. It isn't a spiritual high that removes us from the problems of everyday living. Instead it's a love that moves us **into** the life of the community here and now. This is a love that changes our direction from self-interest and self-centeredness to the needs of other people. Because Jesus gave himself to us we should give ourselves to each other, especially by caring for those in need. So much of First John is a great letter of praise about the wonder of God's love, a love that is more than word or speech, a love that is shown in truth and action. Just as we have received love from Christ so we are called to practice that love in our dealings with others. Christian love is defined by the way of life that God has called us to. And to love in the way of Christ is to be obedient to his will. Christ came not only for a few but for the whole world. See 1 John 2:2.

**Isaiah 56:10-12 NRS** Israel's<sup>1</sup> sentinels are blind, they are all without knowledge; they are all silent dogs that cannot bark; dreaming, lying down, loving to slumber. <sup>11</sup> The dogs have a mighty appetite; they never have enough. The shepherds also have no understanding; they have all turned to their own way, to their own gain, one and all. <sup>12</sup> "Come," they say, "let us<sup>1</sup> get wine; let us fill ourselves with strong drink. And tomorrow will be like today, great beyond measure."

**Jeremiah 10:21-22 NRS** <sup>21</sup> For the shepherds are stupid, and do not inquire of the LORD; therefore they have not prospered, and all their flock is scattered. <sup>22</sup> Hear, a noise! Listen, it is coming -- a great commotion from the land of the north to make the cities of Judah a desolation, a lair of jackals.

**Ezekiel 34:1 NRS** The word of the LORD came to me: <sup>2</sup> Mortal, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel: prophesy, and say to them -- to the shepherds: Thus says the Lord GOD: Ah, you shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? <sup>3</sup> You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fatlings; but you do not feed the sheep. <sup>4</sup> You have not strengthened the weak, you have not healed the sick, you have not bound up the injured, you have not brought back the strayed, you have not sought the lost, but with force and harshness you have ruled them.

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