

“Life Laid Down”

Valley Presbyterian Church – April 22, 2018

Fourth Sunday of Easter

I John 3:16-18, 23-24

Rev. John Wahl

John 10:11-18

An alternate translation of I John 3 verses 16-18, which we heard from Marilyn earlier, reads: *This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters. If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in that person? Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth.*

The world often teaches us to hate those that offend us, to hope for the worst for those that harm us, and to pursue vengeance. God’s love, however, is the complete opposite. From Leviticus, in the Old Testament, we are told, *Do not seek revenge, or bear a grudge against anyone among you, but love your neighbor as yourself* (19:18); the second half of what Jesus calls the greatest commandment. And so, we have a choice: to either love as God instructs us, or not. That is what our God-given free will requires of us: to make the decision whether or not to walk the often difficult path of love.¹

Love is a difficult concept to pin down; its scope and influence are so vast that it plays a role in the entirety of Christian life. This is something the author of John’s letters seemed to sense better than anyone among the New Testament writers. I John is by no means the longest epistle in the New Testament, yet it far and away contains more references to love (thirty-five) than any other. Likewise, John’s gospel uses the word love almost twice as many times as it comes up in any of the other three gospels.

Clearly, John saw love as the defining trait for God, and for those who are called children of God. Loving one another in imitation of God’s love is the message we have heard from the very beginning. Love was from the beginning because God was in the beginning. Love, in other words, has much to do with the very creation in which we live and of which we are a part. For creation itself sprang from the bubbling overflow of God’s love. Like a shaken-up bottle of champagne, so also God’s love moved that – sooner or later – the cork had to explode open and – when it did – a river of sparkling love gushed forth and sprayed everywhere.²

Creation is that overflow of love; for it was God’s desire to extend the life and the love that already so exquisitely existed among the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

¹ Shari Rates, “What’s Love Got to Do with It?” from *Day1.org*

² Scott Hoezee from *Center for Preaching Excellence*

Theologians of the early church called this “perichoresis,” which is a Greek word meaning the shared love of the three persons in the Godhead, expressed as something like a dance. Our word “choreography” emerges from the same root. Whereas later traditions tended to depict the Trinity as a triangle, the early church preferred a circle. The Trinity is like an ever-moving circle of dance in which the Father, Son and Holy Spirit constantly and forever move in and through one another in perfect harmony and joy. The three persons of God are so invested in one another, so caring of one another, that – though three – they form one God. From the beginning, and for all of eternity, they have been serving each other and finding their joy in it.

So, it is no surprise that, at some point, those three persons decided that so great was this love – a love so focused on the other – that they imagined an entire universe with whom they could further share that love. God was under no compulsion to create; and yet it is so *like* God to want to create; to desire sharing of love. God’s motivation to create the world is similar to what motivates us to invite friends to celebrate with us the anniversary of our parents, or the wedding of a child: we want to widen the circle of love and joy; we desire to share the occasion with those beyond our immediate family that we also love. Something like that was what brought about creation: the love of God within the Trinity bubbled over in a desire to spread the joy they shared, among one another, with others.

Love, therefore, compels us to take care of another so that, in the perfect world, you need not worry about yourself because everyone else in the circle’s dance is taking good care of you. All of us desire to feel valued, safe, and worthwhile; but in our sin – and our experiences of lacking love – we try to achieve those positive feelings by isolating ourselves, by putting others down, by competitions in which we can win, and others therefore lose. We build ourselves up by tearing others down through destructive gossip and being suspicious of the motives of others.

In all these ways, we try to attain what God wants us to feel, which is a sense of safety and worth. But God knows that only by love for one another can we grant to each the dignity that we deserve; that without community, we can never feel them. In our arrogance, or ignorance, we saw off the limb we’re sitting on, cutting ourselves off from the very community which, if it only could be filled with love, would become a place of care and mutual affirmation.³

In our still-sinful world, the only way this can happen if we can see God’s love for us, and – taking our cues from God – our need to love each other. No community can exist for long without love: no family can be happy, no marriage can thrive, no congregation can stay together without compassionate, faithful, forgiving love. As

³ Hoezee

John's letter reminds us, playing lip-service to love is not enough; through mercy, care and giving, we demonstrate a love that is shown *in truth and action* (v. 18)

In today's gospel reading, we are reminded of the familiar image of Jesus as the Good Shepherd, the one who willingly lays down his life for the sake of the flock. We may tend to think of the word "good" in a similar way that we do "love:" too ill-defined, overused and under-whelming. How about *excellent, outstanding, or amazing*? Shouldn't Jesus, who lays down his life for others – for us – be something better than good?

Later in John's gospel, though, as Jesus gives his final instructions to his disciples before going to the cross, he says: *No-one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends.* (15:13) Lest we believe that life laid down is something for Jesus alone, there is the reminder that being a good shepherd is not just his calling, but ours as well.

Maybe that is why Jesus is the *Good* Shepherd and not the "awesome" shepherd; or the "perfect" shepherd. Because, at some point, we have to understand and accept the fact that we are being asked to be a shepherd as well. If we had to follow in "extraordinary" footsteps, we would find every explanation possible, every excuse imaginable, to decline Jesus' command.⁴

It's tempting to feel sometimes like caring for sisters and brothers in the flock is not our responsibility; that it's none of our business. It's also difficult sometimes to know how broadly to extend that circle of caring: to immediate or extended family; to how many neighbors; what about to those who have chosen to leave church behind: do they still deserve or even want our love? Is their anger or frustration or indifference justified? One of the beautiful images of this gospel lesson is that there are other flocks that the Good Shepherd is seeking to bring together as one unified whole. And so, we can pray that we might grow to trust to God the fate of each and every one of God's children because of the grace shown by God who sends the Good Shepherd; the one who lays down his life for us and for all people out of nothing other than sheer, abiding, and eternal love; the same love that overflowed to bring about creation.

Sisters and brothers, God is at work in our midst, and through us as the church, to extend this invitation to a loving and abundant life offered by the Good Shepherd. God is using your life and our collective witness to invite people to see the love of God and the goodness of creation. By praying for someone, by showing them some act of love of compassion, by offering them an invitation into relationship and community, you might be the vessel by which God continues to reach out and embrace the beloved sheep that currently reside at the edges of, or even beyond, the fold. The Good Shepherd commands

⁴ Karoline Lewis, "On Being the Good Shepherd"

us, because he need us, to do good; to love others up to even the point of laying down our life for them.⁵

We are, after all, Easter people. Nothing in heaven or on earth; nothing past, present or future; neither life nor death; nothing can separate us from the love of God made known to us in Jesus, the Good Shepherd. Loss might shock us, give us pain and pause; but it does not change our identity as beloved children of God, and it does not diminish our calling to share our love in word and deed. It means that, following Jesus' example, we can choose to willingly invest our lives in other people's lives such that life – apart from community, away from the flock – no longer makes sense.

May Jesus the Good Shepherd look upon this particular flock with his protection, his provision and his peace; and may we live our lives as Easter people, confident that the life of abundance and joy has been freely offered to us and to all people by the one who willingly lays down his life for our sake. Thanks be to God; AMEN.

⁵ David Lose, "God is Not Done Yet"