

Nathan Brown
 "What Does Love Require?"
 May 3, 2009
 West Side Christian Church

1 John 3:16-24

It's probably easier to skip over this passage. John writes, "We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another."

When we hear the words, "lay down our lives," they are spoken with tones of awe and reverence, as they should. In the public arena, we hear these words in praising the sacrifice of a soldier who dies to save others, or perhaps of the rescue workers who die while attempting to save people from a burning building or rising waters.¹

These words also tend to elicit thoughts and images of martyrdom. We think of individuals who stood up for what they believed in and were killed as a result—Joan of Arc, Martin Luther King, Jr., Jesus Christ, himself.

Let's just be honest from the outset. Most of us are not going to express our love by "laying down our lives, for someone else." Not many are willing to be burned at the stake, hanged, or shot as a result of speaking truth to power. Thus, it's probably just easier to skip over this passage—move on and look for an assignment in the Gospel that has a much more accessible entry.

However, we know that this would not be faithful to the text...to choose what is easier. So, we must find in these difficult words what God is demanding of us. What does it mean that we ought to lay down our lives for one another? According to John, what exactly does love require?

In order that we not completely ignore the words John is literally saying, it is important to acknowledge that while most of us will not make the grandiose sacrifice of giving our physical life for someone else, some will. We know that sometimes self-sacrifice can mean physical death.

We know that when we stand beside victims of injustice or hate, we might become the next victim. If we go in love to those who are under daily threat of violence or war and share with them a witness for healing and peace, we have to expect the next bomb or bullet will find us. In every age, Christians have acted with

¹ Cole-Turner, Ronald. "Theological Perspective-Easter 4-1 John 3:16-24." *Feasting on the Word*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008. Pg. 442.

such Christlike love, going where they do not have to go and suffering what they could easily avoid.²

More often, though, the stakes are much lower for you and me. Most of us are not going to lay down our lives as one grand gesture or one final event. Fred Craddock puts it like this:

He says, “We think giving our all to the Lord is like taking a \$1000.00 bill and laying it on the table—‘Here’s my life, Lord. I’m giving it all.’ But the reality for most of us is that God sends us to the bank and has us cash in the \$1000.00 for quarters. We go through life putting out 25 cents here and 50 cents there. Usually, giving our life to Christ isn’t glorious. It’s done in all those little acts of love, 25 cents at a time.”³

Laying down our lives in love is a process. For most of us, this will happen over the course of our lives, one cup of water here, one warm embrace there. Do not be fooled, though, that this kind of laying down our lives for love is somehow easier.

Laying down one’s life, at its core, still means self-sacrifice. Twenty-five cents here means putting others first. Fifty Cents there means living for the good of others. One dollar here means making time for others. One dollar there means reorienting our lives to the needs of others.

Perhaps the portion of this text that really helps us understand what it means to lay down our lives comes later in the passage when John writes, “let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.” This short fragment of the entire passage invites *everyone* who has language for, or a concept of, love to take on the work of sacrifice.⁴

The text, in this instance then, does not really ask for strong political response or a powerful momentous action. It calls for everyday people, like you and me, who have something to give, to open our hearts to the people who have need. Love, then, at its core, becomes an activity, a response, or as John writes, “an action;” not just a word or a feeling.

I recently finished reading a book entitled, *The Shack*, by William Young. Many of you have probably heard of it or read it. It has spent weeks at the top of the New York Times Best Seller List. There are churches all over the world studying this work of fiction because it has had such a profound impact on people’s lives.

² Ibid, 444.

³ Perkins, Pheme. *The New Interpreter’s Biblical Commentary: Mark*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995. Pg.629.

⁴ Cole-Turner, 443.

The story is about a man named Mac, whose daughter is kidnapped and murdered. In order to find redemption and reconciliation in his life, God invites him back to the shack where his daughter is killed. It is in this shack that Mac spends time with God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit, making sense of all of life's theological questions, particularly those related to his daughter's death.

Toward the end of the book, God, who is referred to as Papa, attempts to describe himself to Mac, using a grammatical metaphor. Papa says, "I am a verb. I am that I am. I will be who I will be. I am a verb! I am alive, dynamic, ever active, and moving. I am a verb...if the universe is only a mass of nouns, it is dead. Unless 'I am,' there are no verbs, and verbs are what makes the universe alive."⁵

In a sense, I think this is what John says to us in our reading this morning. God's love at work in the world is active and not passive. If Easter reminds us that God is alive and that God is embodied in the ministry of the church, then our ministry must be a verb and not a noun. John says love is made known by Jesus laying down his own life, therefore, we ought to lay down our lives for one another.

Love requires action. Love requires response. Love requires that we do something. Love requires that we sacrifice. Love requires that we give of ourselves twenty-five cents here, fifty cents there.

As I mentioned earlier, this is easier said than done. Instinctively, I think we all know that love is about action, but taking that action is the most difficult part of loving others; in part because we tend to complicate things, don't we?

I always struggle with the homeless person, who has a sign on the street corner. How do I put love into action toward him? Do I give him money? Do I offer to drive him to a shelter? Do I stop at the nearby McDonald's and bring back a burger? Do I order him a box from Angel Food and tell him I will deliver it to him? Do I go home that evening and write a check to Oasis? Do I attend a city council meeting and advocate for the new homeless service center?

Yes, love is an action. God's love is a verb, but how to act on that love can become a complicated set of circumstances....if we allow it.

I remember when I was in college, the sixteen year-old brother of my best friend from high school was killed in a car accident. For days I did not call Michael, knowing that he would be bombarded with phone calls and inundated with people at his house. I told myself that I wanted to give he and his family the time they needed to grieve and the space necessary to have peace and quiet. Besides, what could I say that would be helpful to him at such a dark time?

⁵ Young, William. *The Shack*. Windblown Media. Pg. 204

On about the fifth day, Michael called me. He confessed his grief. He talked about his anger. He admitted not being able to make sense of this significant loss. I realized in the course of our conversation, that he had needed me to respond, and I didn't. I justified that in not responding, I was actually being more loving. In the end, though, I made it more complicated than it needed to be. A simple phone call, a note in the mail, some action, any action, would have been evidence of God's love.

How we respond in love is not always as important as simply responding. I think John makes the point in this passage that it's not how you lay down your life, but that you lay it down. It doesn't have to be in some remarkable gesture or some amazing renunciation. It just needs to be a verb. "Let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action."

In this Easter season, we are reminded that Christ is not dead, that Christ is not a noun. No, Easter reminds us that the God we know in Jesus Christ is alive, always moving, always acting, always dynamic.

May the love of this God be made known to the world through not only the truth and action of Jesus Christ laying down his life, but also in the truth and action of the way we lay down our lives for others.

Amen.