

“Laying Down Our Lives”

1 John 3:16-24

7 May, 2006 – the Fourth Sunday of Easter

the Rev. Todd R. Goddard, pastor

Zion West Walworth United Methodist Church

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¹⁶We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. ¹⁷How 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?

¹⁸Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action. ¹⁹And by this we will know that we are from the truth and will reassure our hearts before him ²⁰whenever our hearts condemn us; for God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything. ²¹Beloved, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have boldness before God; ²²and we receive from him whatever we ask, because we obey his commandments and do what pleases him.

²³And this is his commandment, that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us. ²⁴All who obey his commandments abide in him, and he abides in them. And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit that he has given us.

Prayer.

Our Epistle lesson for today points us towards the very heart of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. It serves as a pathway inviting us to travel its well-worn way that leads to the very core and center of Christianity.

I know that the language I choose makes Christianity sound like a voluntary social club, where everyone is free to choose to follow Jesus, to draw close to God, to lead a Christian life. And, indeed, there are many facets of voluntary involvement. But lets face it, there are many non-negotiable characteristics of the Christian life.

Certainly, baby Jayden didn’t have a choice this morning – to be baptized and be included into the circle of Christianity. God warmed Amy’s heart, and those of the Hoodgkins family, leaving Jayden completely out of the decision process, and it has resulted in him forever being identified by God as a follower, as a disciple of Jesus Christ. By the way, having some decisions made for us isn’t all bad. Each of us should thank God Almighty that our loving mother or father or godparent was so moved by God that we were brought forward and presented at the Baptismal font.

Participation in both sacraments really isn’t voluntary. Jesus commands us to baptize, to go into the world and make more Christians, and to celebrate the Eucharist, to break bread and share wine whenever we gather. Of course, following a command may be seen as voluntary – and, yes, indeed, many choose not to follow these sacramental commands of Jesus – but that doesn’t change the nature of God’s initiative. We aren’t told to baptize or celebrate Holy Communion when we feel like it; when we are in the mood for it. We aren’t told that it’s left up to us when we want to follow the command of Jesus, or not. Jesus just tells us to do it.

There are some things in this world that are not left up to us to decide.

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Christianity isn't filled with an abundance of inflexible commands. In reality there are just a few. In addition to baptism and Eucharist, forgiveness is one essential command. Jesus tells us forthright, just as we are forgiven, so should we forgive those who have sinned against us. Just consult the Lord's Prayer, the prayer Jesus taught us to pray, if you have any questions about forgiveness.¹

In the everyday, garden variety, day-in day-out, course of life, forgiveness isn't that difficult of a command to follow. A coworker hurts us in the break room, or says something hurtful to us in the office; yes, it does cause us to be set back on our heels. But given a little bit of time and the opportunity for objective reflection, most of us see the value in attempting to restore the relationship and are eager to walk the road of forgiveness.

Even in the case of more heinous offences, those who take their faith seriously, as a committed response to a forgiving Savior, can find it within themselves to come to some understanding of forgiveness, even if it is just meant to get the person out of the way and out of our lives. It may take a lot of time and a long jail sentence for the one who committed the offense, but most of us should be capable of extraordinary forgiveness.

The fourth and final command that God expects Christians to follow is the command to love – love the Lord with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength – love your neighbors as yourself – and love our enemies. The first two, loving God and loving neighbors, are usually pretty simple, especially if you have really nice neighbors! But loving your enemies; now that's a horse of a completely different color.

The command to love is not voluntary on God's part. The decision about whether or not we follow God's command is something that is left up to us.

We usually think of love as being an involuntary emotional response. You know, the eros that is felt when that special person looks at you from across the room and your heart makes a sudden flutter. Or the agape love that is experienced when a mother holds their child to their breast or when a father makes sacrifices for his son. These emotional love connections are entirely natural. We are born with these abilities.

But the love that defines the Christian life is not natural. "It is not something we are born with. It is something that comes to us through Christ, something that we are expected, commanded to show. We are determined to love," as William Willimon so correctly observes.²

The existentialist philosopher Nietzsche recognized that we do enjoy resurrecting old hurts. We do like to hold on to the hatred that poisons life, that comes from the infection of a festering wound. List those who have offended you. I know I can fill a sheet of paper, or the better part of it, if I think long and hard enough.

Consider how we demonize our enemies. After all, our enemies have hurt us, provoked us, ticked us off. Doesn't the old statement hold true that in war we kill our enemies twice? First we kill any shred of humanity in them, then we kill them with bullets. I believe it was General George S. Patton in his Speech to the Third U.S. Army who observed that in war the goal isn't to die for your country. The goal was to make your enemy (though I believe he used an expletive to describe his enemy) die for his country.

It might be possible to proof-text the scriptures to wiggle around this command to love our enemies. We probably could find it to “learn to live with each other despite your differences,” or to “let bygones be bygones,” as most mothers would tell us. But the scriptures say much more than this.

Love one another.³ It is a command, not an option.

In war, once the shooting starts, we think that all moral bets are off. Hit hard, hit fast, and don't stop until victory. When someone has wronged us, hurt us, offended against us, we tend to think first of retaliation, of suing, of not resting until we get our pound of flesh. The Jewish merchant, Shylock says “The pound of flesh which I demand of him is dearly bought as mine, and I will have it.”⁴ But in the Christian life, when we are wronged, all moral bets are definitely not called off. In fact, according to this ethic, it is precisely when we are used spitefully and wrongfully that the true moral test begins.⁵ Jesus commands us to love our enemies. Our Epistle author of First John supports this moral demand to love our enemies. Beloved friends and neighbors, as your pastor, I, too, am obligated to stand before you and command that you love your enemies.

Loving others, even to the point of laying down our lives, for people even as repulsive as our enemies doesn't come naturally. When we do, however, we are given the moral high ground by God Almighty. We are able to consider the mitigating circumstances that may have led others to hurt us. We are able to see the person as another of God's beloved children, who, even yet, is capable of redemption. It may be unnatural to advocate for a life sentence instead of the death penalty, as was done just this past week in the trial of Zacarias Moussaoui, for example, but this is God's way. This is the compassionate love that is at the heart of the Christian life, that, just as God has loved me, so too must I love those who persecute me, who have sinned against me, even those who have wanted to kill me.

How is such extraordinary love possible? It comes from the recognition that we have been enemies of God. We have failed to follow the directives of the Law and turned a deaf ear to the prophets. Though God loved us so much to claim us as His children, we've rebelled against that love. God loves us so much that He's sent us His Son, Jesus. Our God as loved us to not only forgive our sins in the death and resurrection of Jesus, as we so often note, but to continue to love us, guide us, and call us forth – to love others.

Time and time again, God says to us “Just as I have loved you, so should you love others.”

The ways of the cross, the journey of Christianity are quite simple and straightforward. Baptize and make disciples. Gather and share the bread and cup of Holy Communion. Forgive those who sin against you. And love; love God, love neighbors, love your enemies. And through the willful act of love, our enemies will become known to us as our friends.

This is the Word of the Lord, as it has come to me this day. Thanks be to God. Amen.

¹ Matthew 6:12

² Willimon, W., *Determined to Love*, Pulpit Resources, Logos Productions, Inc., May 7, 2006

³ 1 John 3:23

⁴ Shakespeare, W., Shylock, in *The Merchant of Venice*, act 4, sc. 1, l. 99-100.

⁵ Willimon, W., *Ibid.*