

Love in Action

Today we take up yet another passage from the little book of 1 John. This book is a treasure trove of commentary and insight on helping us understand the breadth, width, length, height, and depth of Christian love.

Christian love—it's a phrase, a term, an idea, a concept, a way of being, an identity—that we have heard about, talked about, pondered, and considered as we seek to live our lives of faith. And yet, so pervasive is this talk of Christian love that we can easily gloss over it and nod in quiet acquiescence that, yes, Christian love is that to which we are called to observe and practice as Christians, while at the same time, perhaps avoiding a full scale embrace of it.

I mean, who can be against Christian love? Right? Can there be any argument or debate as to this, our calling? To profess anything other than support for love can certainly be construed to be in contradistinction to the core Christian identity.

And we may cringe or shuffle uneasily in our seats when we come to such Biblical statements that reveal the full implications of Christian love like, "We know love by this, that he [that is Jesus] laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another." (1 Jn. 3:16) Again, we have heard this before. Many of us have heard it so many times over the course of our lives, that we may no longer consider its fullness—that we ought to lay down our lives for one another.

Now halfway through this season of Easter, the story of Jesus giving up his life on the cross of crucifixion is still fresh in our memories. We know and remember the events of Good Friday when Jesus, after having been unjustly accused and then convicted of sedition, is put to death on a cross by Roman governmental officials. Jesus who is innocent of any wrongdoing willingly, without resistance, lays down his life for those of his day and for all who come after. The event takes on the fullness of meaning when Jesus, after having been laid in a tomb like any other who had died, is raised from the dead by the power of resurrection thereby extending life and wholeness to us.

This is the central truth for us as Christians, that Jesus died and Jesus rose from the dead. We know it. We believe it. We proclaim it. And we share it.

We affirm that Jesus was fully human and fully divine. The fully divine part helps us more easily accept the amazing event of his death and resurrection for us since he is one with God. If we gloss over or downplay the fully human aspect of Jesus in this gift of his death and resurrection, we in effect miss the full impact of our call to lay down our lives for one another.

History is replete with examples of those people who out of a sense of duty, determined conviction, or standing for justice have put their very lives on the line. And within Christian history, there are countless examples of those who went the full distance of laying down their lives for others out of Christian love.

Tradition holds that each of the disciples of Jesus eventually faced a death sentence of their own for their part in spreading the good news about Jesus and his love for the world. While the means of death varied, many of them also died by crucifixion. For example, Peter is said to have requested that he be crucified head down so as to not have the same crucifixion as Jesus. Similarly, Andrew is said to

have been crucified on an X-shaped cross, which is where the Andrew's Cross was adopted by the Church of Scotland.

Jesus' disciples clearly heard and embraced the call to love by laying down their lives in this most intense way, following the lead of Jesus himself. As they carried on Jesus' ministry, their faith and commitment grew stronger and stronger to the point that they could follow Jesus' example.

But it's easy for us to put their examples on a pedestal that is just a bit shorter than the pedestal upon which we place the example Jesus gives. Jesus and his disciples, who are critically important to developing the faith that has been passed on to us today, can actually take on a larger-than-life role. And in so doing we can find it hard to relate to them as we consider the call to each of us to lay down our life for one another.

As I said though, history provides us with many examples across the centuries. And there are two from the 20th century that bear mentioning again even if we have pointed to them before.

The first example is that of a German pastor named Dietrich Bonhoeffer who lived during the time of World War II. Bonhoeffer was both a pastor and theologian who was part of a group of Christians in Nazi Germany who were actively opposing the efforts of the Nazi Party to nationalize the Christian churches under the leadership of Adolph Hitler. In a nutshell, the confessing churches held firm that there is only one head of the church and that head is Jesus Christ. It is surprising and distressing to know that the majority of Christian churches did not resist this move to control the church. So those who did resist, stood out and were clearly identifiable. As Hitler continued to consolidate his power and influence, Bonhoeffer joined with a few others in plotting the assassination of Hitler. Clearly this group of Christians were not pacifists in that they perceived a need for the complete removal of Hitler by ending his life. The assassination attempt failed and Bonhoeffer was arrested and sent to a German concentration camp where he himself was executed by hanging just a few weeks before the end of the war.

Bonhoeffer's death is a stark example of a follower of Jesus going the full distance in laying down his life for others. His determination and resolve for the Christian church to resist corruption by staying true to the only head of the church, Jesus, led to the renewal of the church as the war ended. His example is a legacy to all who have come after him to the truth and purity of the church.

The second 20th century example of one who laid down his life for another is that of another Christian pastor, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. King stood in a long line of others who were working for the establishment of the civil rights of all people in the U.S. As a black man himself, he was a leader in bringing about the change that was sorely needed in our nation. His ministry in the tumultuous 1960s came in the midst of all kinds of social unrest. With civil rights at the top of the list, there was also the beginnings of the equal rights for women movement, the environmental movement, the nuclear proliferation movement, and the protests over the war in Viet Nam. Dr. King was a prolific speaker who was able to rise above the fray to proclaim a message of unity and equality understood to be universal rights of all people. He was also a master of leading and advocating non-violent civil disobedience as a way of bringing about the needed change. But in spite of his own resistance to violence, he himself died at the hands of an assassin as he was standing on the balcony of a motel in Memphis, Tennessee in 1968. In his death, he laid down his life for others, as called for in scripture.

So much more can and should be said about Bonhoeffer and King. But for our purposes today, they are real life examples of that to which all of us are called as Christians.

While we have been and are influenced and impressed by the example of these two, and while we can likely come up with some other examples from our own experiences, it is tempting to put them on pedestals as well that set them apart from our own experience and our own awareness of just how hard it is to imagine following their examples.

So I would like to move to a more close to home way for us to consider this call to lay down our lives for one another. We don't have to be a Martin Luther King, Jr. or a Dietrich Bonhoeffer or one of the apostles of Jesus to live into this call. Ronald Cole-Turner has summed it all up well:

More often the stakes are lower. But the principle is the same. Laying down our lives, at its core, can mean any number of ways in which we lay aside our claim to own our lives. We lay down our lives when we put others first. We lay down our lives when we live for the good of others. We lay down our lives when we make time for others. To love others is to lay down our life for them. When we lay down the completely normal human desire to live for ourselves, and when instead we allow the love of God to reorient us toward the needs of others, we are laying down our lives. (*Feasting on the Word: preaching the revised common lectionary, Year B, Vol. 2* / David L Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, gen. eds., © 2008 Westminster John Knox Press, p. 444)

This morning we've already heard about an opportunity locally to do exactly that by supporting the Housing First Village being built by our local HRDC. We'll be hearing even more about it at the end of our service today. It's just one of many such examples locally of how we can put others first, in essence laying down our lives for other.

This is our response to the question raised in 1 John. "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?" (1 Jn . 3:17)

Turns out that Christian love is something tangible into which we can truly live. You and I, individually and collectively, can put this love into action thereby making a difference in the lives of those in our midst. When Christians do this in every place, the overall impact is truly worldwide and global.

So Christian love—it really is something that we know and experience. Christian love—it is something we share generously. Christian love—it is that to which we are called and into which we live.

Now to the One
who by the power at work within us
is able to do far more abundantly
than all we can ask or imagine,
to God be glory in the church
and in Christ Jesus
to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.