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4 Easter, Year B
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Laying Down One's Life

The fourth Sunday of Easter is tried and true a day that stays on message: Jesus is the Good Shepherd. A Shepherd who calls us and one we should follow wherever he leads. We are led, we hope, to green pastures and still waters. And should we encounter evil, fear, pain or harm – our own personal valleys of the shadow of death – our hope and trust is that we will know and feel that we are not alone. The staff and rod of the Shepherd can comfort believers.

The language is familiar. John 10:11 "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep." This morning I wanted to dig deeper into what it might mean and what it takes to lay down one's life for others. Simply: what is asked of us?

We have all probably heard the expression before: "I would give my life for," _____ fill in the blank. Sometimes the object is downright exaggerated and laughable. I would give my life for a ticket to the Super Bowl, to orbit the earth, to have another piece of your favorite chocolate cake or a chance to meet your movie star idol.

I was at the DMV last week renewing my license. You know how this works: you get a number and wait your turn. While I waited I watched rolling videos overhead that promoted the importance of becoming an organ donor. Renewing your driver's license is a key moment in that decision. The videos feature family members talking quite openly and honestly about how something good can come out of something tragic – a life if lost in an instant and a life is given. A thoughtful way to anticipate laying down one's life so that another can live. More than 5,000 people in New England are waiting for a transplant. Every 12 minutes another name is added to the national waiting list and an average of 22 people die each day waiting for their heart, lung, kidney, liver or pancreas transplant.

Yet, a more full and fair question: would we, in moment, lay down our life for another. Be it adrenalin and or call of duty.

Last month the world heard of another terrorist attack, this time in southern France. Three people lost their lives in a senseless act. What stood out was the account of a French police officer, Arnaud Beltrame, 45, who died after swapping places with a female hostage during an attack by an ISIS supporter in a supermarket. We see this in the movies all the time, but to see it play out in real time is another thing. The French President said in a statement. "By giving his life to end the murderous escapade, he died a hero."

I don't believe what motivates people to give their lives for others – especially in a moment of crisis – is a prevailing desire to be or die a hero. Something else, something

greater takes over. It is a human connection – a mystical and subconscious connection – that can become the spark for action and sacrifice. Humanity is unlocked in an instant and normal people can do extraordinary things for others.

1 John, our 2nd reading this morning, comes out of the same community that produced John's gospel. It uses such phrases and words such as "my little children" and "beloved". It also breaks down some simple theology. 4:16 God is love, and those who abide in love abide God and God abides in them. V. 21 Those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also. So, this love thing is deeply rooted in the plan. And it can take a lifetime sorting through and living into what this means for us and those we around us.

The author of the letter cites the first murder ever recorded in the Bible: when Cain took the life of his brother Abel. This becomes the contrast for all the focus on the Good Shepherd. Instead of taking a life, Jesus laid down his life. 1 John 3:16-24 v.16 We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another.

And yet, I ask again: what does it mean to lay down our lives for others? Does it have to mean dying on crosses, trading places with innocent hostages or running into burning buildings? Does it have to be spectacular or can it be ordinary. Might there be more practical and accessible responses?

There seems to be an opening here: 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?

Daily sacrifice for others is form of laying down one's life.

There is a calculus then to be made: For the one who has – in this case the world's goods – one has to first see a brother or sister in need, and then help or refuse.

What jumps out to me are the actions of seeing and refusing.

I've preached often about the challenge and demand of not averting one's eyes from the troubles and uncomfortable aspects of life. To notice people. To see people. When we are busy or preoccupied, it is very easy and natural to just keep going and moving. I too fall prey to this. To stop, see and listen and act is a part of what this teaching on love is all about.

The letter goes on to implore: 18Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.

We hear echoes of this in the rejection of calls for "prayers for the victims" after the most recent mass shooting in our nation. Enough with the prayers – people are saying – action is needed. So many are marching, writing letters, registering to vote and speaking out to their friends for some kind of change that keeps our young people safe – everyone safer.

1 John 3:17 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?

Need is such a powerful and loaded word. People in need. A powerful and loaded classification of people.

Consider our most basic needs. What would you have on your list? Water, food, shelter, medicine. I would add companionship and community, for a life lived alone and isolated falls outside of what God desires for us. Social commentator Tom Bodett, of the NPR Wait Wait Don't Tell Me radio fame agrees: "They say a person needs just three things to be truly happy in this world: someone to love, something to do, and something to hope for."

I remember learning the key difference between a need and a want as a child, and I now echo those lessons as a parent. Did I really need the latest toy or bike or electronic device upgrade? Probably not. But the want fuels our consumer economy and challenges God's economy.

Who is the final abettor and judge of need? Perhaps we all are.

Brothers and sisters in need: the opioid epidemic continues to rage on disrupting and ending lives and costing untold losses. The forgotten and left behind in New England mill towns, the rust belt and the Mississippi Delta. Refugees fleeing war. Migrants running from violence and poverty. The elderly living alone. Families trying to get back on track – sleeping in church basements for weeks on end in order to save for a down payment on an apartment.

What I sense is the words of Scripture we hear are meant to empower and inspire and not inoculate us from responsibility or pile up guilt upon us. If we have something and we see a need: do something. If you have time, give time. If you have some extra and disposable income, consider sharing what you have for the good of others.

I'm reminded of the wonderful South African word Umbuntu which means 'I am; because of you' or 'I am because you are.'

In response to the wonderful image of Jesus as shepherd and good, leading us into the future, I hope we enlarge the company of people we keep. We may be sheep, but we are part of a flock. There will be times we are the one in need – may we receive help gracefully. There are times when people next to us are in need – may we have ears to listen. And, there may be people around the globe who are need more than we can know. What do we really need? To love and be loved. To care. To see. To give as we have been given.