

## LAY DOWN YOUR LIFE

**Psalm 23**  
**1 John 3:16-24**

**Faith Community**  
**May 3, 2009**

### Introduction

Fred Craddock says that when he was a kid, often he came down for breakfast and would find a strange man sitting at his kitchen table. The men were often dirty, ugly, and poorly dressed, and they scared Fred. His family lived near railroad tracks and men, whom people called “hobos,” would come begging along the tracks and take whatever they could get.

Fred said, “Mama, who’s that in our kitchen?”

“His name is Henry and he’s hungry.”

“Where’d he come from?”

“From the railroad tracks.”

“Weren’t you scared?”

“He’s hungry.”

“Well, I’m scared of him.”

“Well, he’s hungry.”

### I

There’s a lot of talk about love – loving people and being compassionate. But we all know that talk is cheap; actions cost a lot more. It’s not what we say but how we act that really counts. What we do, how we live our lives, is a much clearer statement of what we believe than simply the words we speak. Actions are a great deal more difficult to do than words are to say.

We all have seen people who “have the love of Jesus in their hearts” but treat people who are different from them with disdain. For how many years did Christians meet piously on Sunday morning to worship God and, at the same time, hate African Americans, the very people we kidnapped from their homeland and brought here to make into our slaves? John says we can’t love in word or speech, but must love in truth and action.

My grandfather was a very religious Scotch-Irish Presbyterian. Every Saturday night they had devotions and knelt down at the dining room chairs and prayed fervently as they prepared for the Sabbath and morning worship. My grandfather’s family came to the United States from Ireland, and he had an intense dislike for Catholics. I don’t ever remember him saying a good word about Catholics. He inherited a good bit of land from his family, and ironically, he eventually sold it to the Catholic Church so they could build a nunnery.

Once, when we went to visit my grandparents and were just getting out of the car, my younger brother asked my dad, “If grandpa dislikes Catholics, how come he sold his property to them?” I guess I get my sense of humor from my dad, because he answered, “Son, why don’t

you ask grandpa about that!” My mother, whose parents they were, immediately jumped in to say, “Don’t you dare ask him that!”

Generalized statements about love don’t carry much weight. People will always be looking to see if we act on what we say.

## II

The author of First John says that to love is to lay down your life. He says, “We know love because Jesus laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for one another.” That is certainly a demanding statement. Christ’s sacrifice was the ultimate act of love on our behalf. For most of us it seems like an almost impossible thing to ask.

As Paul says in Romans, “Rarely will anyone die for a righteous person – though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. But God proves his love for us in that, while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” Maybe rarely in a heroic act of love, someone might give their life for a good person, but how could John ask that of us?

We hear of the soldier who throws himself on a grenade and gives his life to save the people around him. Joan of Arc gave her life for other people. Martin Luther King Jr laid down his life so that all people could live with greater justice and equality. Oscar Romero, a catholic archbishop in El Salvador, was gunned down as he served mass because he spoke out for the suffering peasants of his country.

There are brave, heroic people who give their lives for the good of others. But not many people are able to do that. Not many people are called to do that.

Dying for others isn’t the only thing that laying down your life means.

## III

If we look carefully at what John is saying, we see that he has a broader understanding of what it means to lay down your life. He says, “We know love because Jesus laid down his life for us - and we ought to lay down our lives for one another.” The very next sentence is, “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?”

He isn’t asking people to die for those who are in need, but to share what they have with them. To lay down your life is to set your life down before someone else; to lay your life out there for them. Laying down your life means giving yourself.

This laying down our lives isn’t usually as heroic as facing death for another, but we are not called on to live a continual life of heroism. Ronald Cole-Turner said it very well:

“For Christians, self-sacrifice should be ordinary, not extraordinary. We ought to lay down our lives, John writes not intending to give a grand challenge for heroic Christians but an everyday commandment for ordinary Christians. The Christian life is a life laid down for others, a life built on self-sacrifice.”<sup>1</sup>

Every time we respond in love to someone else, we are laying down our lives for them. For Christians this isn't something exceptional, but something quite ordinary.

#### IV

I can't imagine more contemporary words than these. They apply to us in the twenty-first century as much as they did to people in the early second century. Love has to be real, and to be real it has to be done, not just discussed. In an age when we can spin words to sound like just the opposite of what they really mean, John commands us to live out our words of love in caring actions.

He summarizes what he is saying in one brief sentence: "This is my commandment," (notice that it is singular-one commandment) "that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another." It is one commandment: to believe and love. Believing in Christ means that we love one another. We can't have it any other way.

#### Conclusion

Ruby Bridges was a small black girl who lived in New Orleans. In the 1960's, when the schools in her area were integrated, all the white students refused to go to public schools. So every day Ruby Bridges got up, got dressed and went to her school. She sat alone in that classroom for one year because no one else was willing to go to school with her.

Her act of love was to sacrifice her own security and, most certainly her comfort, for the good of other children. What should have been a wonderful year of playing together on the playground, of making new friends, of talking with schoolmates about the concerns that young girls have, was instead a lonely year of standing up for standards of justice, equality, and compassion. In a very real sense she laid down her life for thousands of other children.<sup>2</sup>

Our faith and our love can't be in words and speech; it has to be in truth and action.

Amen

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<sup>1</sup> Ronald Cole-Turner in David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, *Feasting on the Word* (Louisville KY: Westminster John Knox., 2008), 442.

<sup>2</sup> See Claudia Highbaugh's comments in David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, *Feasting on the Word* (Louisville KY: Westminster John Knox., 2008), 444.