

4th SUNDAY OF EASTER
April 22, 2018

Text: I John 3:16-24

Theme: Lay Down Our Lives

Christ is risen! Christ is risen indeed! Amen! Alleluia!

Since the Easter season started we have read carefully our assigned lessons with the specific purpose of developing spiritual exercises to do in-between our times of worship. Our first assignment was to become the eyes and ears of Christ. We were to reflect upon what we saw and what we heard so that we could then touch the lives of others. Then we listened to some of the probing questions our Redeemer children asked about the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and (following their example) we were to open our minds and our Bibles to better understand the Scriptures.

I admit that so far our assignments have been easy to accomplish but all of that changes this morning as we explore the 23rd Psalm (which beautifully describes the love of God) and the lesson from 1 John (that commands us to love one another). It seems only natural that we should first understand the nature of God in this relationship before we explore the relationship we are to have with each other.

Preaching on the 23rd Psalm is like preaching on Christmas Eve and Easter. We have heard these words so many times over the span of our lifetime. It is taught to our children in Sunday school as a *must* to memorize. It is cherished by so many of us when we are faced with challenging times. I use it as a prayer when I am with people who have some form of dementia. They may not remember who I am or why I am visiting them but deep within the recesses of their minds they can come up with the words to the Lord's Prayer and the 23rd Psalm. And when our loved ones pass away, we often use this psalm at funerals because it offers us so much comfort.

The 23rd Psalm: God is our shepherd who holds us with tenderness and carries us with confidence. We are the sheep who are completely reliant and dependent upon God as God offers us his compassionate care coupled with his incredible power. God leads us to waters that are calm and soothing to the soul. God heals us when we are afflicted

and retrieves us when we are lost. And when death lurks in the shadows God defends us from our predators even if it means he must lose his own life. Unlike any other psalm there is a sound of triumph at the end that just brings out another – Amen! Alleluia!

It is still Easter and it is still fresh in our minds how God lost his own life through the death of his Son, Jesus Christ. And that reminder dovetails beautifully into 1 John as the message is repeated for us in the 3rd Chapter. It states clearly that we know the love of God in that he laid down his life for us. Those words wash over us with the same consolation we receive from the 23rd Psalm.

But then our hearts sink as we read the next phrase:
And we ought to lay down our lives for one another.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, this is our new assignment: Just as Christ laid down his life for us so we must lay down our lives for one another. And unlike the other spiritual exercises, this is a much more challenging task.

It may cross our minds that as Easter people this lesson no longer pertains to us because Christ made the ultimate sacrifice. No more blood needs to be shed in this way and that is all true. But these words are for Easter people and they cannot be taken lightly or dismissed. When God sent Christ into the world to lay down his life for us, he showed us his undeniable love. And now we hear that the same principle applies to our love towards others.

On this side of the resurrection this phrase tells us that God wants us to do more than just touch the lives of others. Ultimately our actions need to show others what is in our hearts. It will be through such actions that the love of God will be made known to them in a visible and tangible way. We are to mirror the actions of Christ.

Lay down our lives: We speak these words with tones of awe and well we should. Out in the world we hear these words to honor (with respect and gratitude) the sacrifices made by the men and women who have vowed to protect us and our country. We speak well of those who died as they tried to save others from a burning building or from rising waters or from the gunshots of a terrorist. It is these actions (these extraordinary acts of self-sacrifice) that are the test of love in our world.

But the author of 1 John is suggesting something different for us. As Christians our self-sacrifices can seem quite ordinary. We do not have to search for some exceptional way to demonstrate our love to others. I see it all the time when I make home visits and witness the way adult children have sacrificed their time and finances to care for a parent. I see it when members stand with victims of injustice or actively go about the work of the church to eradicate hate crimes and eliminate visible signs of racism. I believe the author of 1 John is telling us to go where we do not have to go and to enter the suffering of another when we could just as easily step aside or step away.

On April 4 we remembered the 50th anniversary of the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Twenty-four hours before his death he preached at a United Church of Christ congregation in Memphis. In the sermon he coined the term *dangerous unselfishness* and defined it within the context of the *Parable of the Good Samaritan*. Based on personal experience he knew how dangerous the road was that led from Jerusalem to Jericho. It was on that road that the Samaritan (a man who was not well-liked by others and who had no reason to put himself at risk) stopped for the traveler who laid at the side of the road robbed and beaten. The Jewish priest did not stop and neither did the Levite (both more likely candidates to show compassion).

Yet it was the Samaritan who engaged in this *dangerous unselfishness* and showed love for another human being who was not his flesh and blood, who was not his friend, and who was not even of his own race and religion. He went where he did not have to go and he took on the suffering of the other when he could have just as easily stepped away.

We may never be called to sacrifice our physical lives for others but we are called to put our own wants aside to do what we can to meet the needs of others, to share their burden, and to alleviate the pain and suffering when and where we can. We are called to be part of this faith community in order to work for the good of all because once we experience the love of God in Christ Jesus then we are compelled to spread it in thought, word, and deed (however imperfectly). As we live in his lavish love we are called to pour ourselves out for others in the name of Jesus Christ. God is asking for more than a mere touch. God is asking for us to love beyond the depths of our emotions.

And this kind of love requires a lot of hard work on our part. It is not just seeing, hearing and touching. It is taking that open Bible and letting others see how the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ have impacted our lives. We seek a higher level of love knowing that the love of God that is so beautifully described for us in the 23rd Psalm is the impetus (the driving force) in doing the unimaginable. And to that we can certainly say again – Amen! Alleluia!