

**4th Sunday of Easter**  
**April 25, 2021**

Text: 1 John 3:16-24

Theme: Love in Truth and Action

Grace and peace to you from God our Father  
and the Lord Jesus Christ – Amen

This is the message we have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another (1 John 3:11). Same words are repeated in Scripture at least eleven different times throughout the New Testament with variations found in both the Old and New Testaments. In John 13 Jesus said it this way: *I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.*

We know this one. We preach and teach that in response to the love of God (that was made evident through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ) we are to love everybody else. We do not have to like them but we do have to love them. However in our lesson we are challenged to consider the extent of our love. We just read that Jesus laid down his life for us and therefore we ought to lay down our lives for one another. Are we to take this literally? Are we being asked to go so far as to die for another human being?

In our gospel lesson Jesus described himself as the good shepherd and the good shepherd was the one who would lay down his life for his sheep. Great! Jesus did it so we do not have to do the same. But then later he too would tell us that no one has greater love than to lay down one's life for one's friends. Are we being asked to put our life on the line for someone dear to us?

We understand that some people have laid down their lives for Christ. We get that and know we do not live in a country where we are asked to defend our faith in Jesus Christ. But others live with that reality every day. They understand fully that their beliefs might lead to their deaths and still they stand firm in their faith. One set of data states that the number of Christians martyred since the time of Christ stands at 70 million people.

And then there are those who die doing the work of justice that Jesus also commands of us. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Archbishop Oscar Romero, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer come to mind immediately. Each of them spoke up for the good of the people around them (driven by their faith). How risky of them. Jobs, relationships, money, and lives can be taken away when we extend our love to those on the fringe of society. It certainly comes at a cost.

I confess to you that this lesson would have been very easy to pass over. If we are not the ones on the front line willing to be burned at the stake, hanged, stoned, or shot as a result of speaking the truth of the gospel then maybe it would make more sense to just move on to a lesson that is more palatable to us. After all it is still Easter. But I could not do so because I (too) want to try to figure out what it means to lay down my life for another.

Truth be told the sacrifice of life (giving up blood and breath) for the sake of the people around us is an act to which very few of us will be called. Instead we keep in our prayers those who have such a calling that they might have the strength and the courage to persevere in their faith. But it is as if the author of 1 John is reading our minds this morning as the two verses that follow this command offer us something that we can relate to in our reality. It starts with a question: *How does the love of God abide in anyone who has all the resources in the world and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses to help?* It ends with a suggestion: *Let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.*

We know the love of God because Jesus laid down his life for us. God will know our love for him when we lay down our resources for those in need. It does not have to take our lives. It does not have to be an extraordinary act. We are simply to embrace those who are around us. As Mother Teresa said it is not the magnitude of our actions (but the amount of love that is put into them) that matters.

On the heels of what seems like an impossible commandment (and one that is difficult for us to understand in our context) we hear something concrete that we can do. It calls those of us who have the resources to open our hearts to the people in need. Love becomes less a doctrine and more a response. Love becomes less a bunch of words we say to one another but embodies a lifestyle for the day-to-day.

We do not die for people but we die to ourselves for their sake. It is putting our own preferences aside to help make the life of someone else better. Love becomes the driving force in seeing how God will achieve the unimaginable. If we say we want to love as God requires of us then we will seek (on a daily basis) a higher level of love that is given to us by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Jesus describes this kind of love by means of the cross. It is at the foot of the cross where we realize that we cannot live without the love of God. Likewise Jesus insists (as does the author of 1 John) that we cannot stand at the foot of the cross without realizing that others need to see our love for them.

In our prayers we should ask God to show us where to go and what to do. We should ask God to help us be satisfied with what he shows us because the ordinary acts of love are just as powerful as the extraordinary ones. We should ask God to remove any obstacles that prevent us from making that kind of selfless and far-reaching love.

Take for example the story of Ruby Bridges. She was just six years old in 1959 when she (a black girl) attended kindergarten at an all-white school. It turned out that she was the only black child who attended that school (that year). It was not an easy transition. Her family suffered for their decision to send her to that school. Her father lost his job. The local grocery store owner would not allow the family to shop there anymore. Her grandparents were removed from their property.

People in their community saw brothers and sisters in need and had to help. In this case both black and white families showed the love of God in a variety of ways. Some white families who at first boycotted the school started to send their children despite the protests. A neighbor provided her father with a new job. Local people babysat the younger children and made sure nobody harmed the house. And it was not until Ruby was an adult that she learned that the clothing she wore to school was sent to her parents by a relative of the child psychiatrist who later wrote a book about Ruby. Norman Rockwell painted a picture about her that she saw when President Obama invited her to the White House.

The good news this morning is that when we act lovingly to others, we can be assured that nothing less than the love of God in Jesus Christ is pulsing through our hearts and hands. Jesus Christ, who is the very love of God incarnate, is always present in our acts of love. It makes us one with Christ. We abide in Christ and Christ abides in us.

We do not need to back away from the command to lay down our lives for others for fear of loss of life. If that is our calling then may God give us the strength to stand firm in our faith. Instead we release that same power of love to those in need. We lay down our resources to participate in the welfare of others.

Love does not need to lead to death. Love lets our eyes be connected to our hearts to see what is visible and what needs to be done. Amen