No Greater Love

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My brother, dad and grandfather were all Marines. I wasn’t.

My growing up years were tainted by Vietnam. It was a controversial, confusing war. By my own admission, I was mildly patriotic in my early years.

I conducted my first funeral at Arlington Cemetery in 1980, shortly after Chris and I arrived at this church. The burial for a retired military officer was accompanied with caisson, military band, soldier pallbearers, taps, a gun salute and the ceremonial folding of the flag. I whispered to my military escort that the military certainly know how to honor their fallen comrades. He smiled in knowing agreement.

I lingered at the cemetery after the funeral to read tombstones of people much younger than I who died in the service of their country. Although I didn’t know them, I was touched by their sacrifice.

Memorial Day stirs me now. Those who have served or are currently serving in the military are due our gratitude. It’s not lost on me that a considerable number of you who serve in the military regard your service in much the same way I speak about my calling to this ministry. Events like Viva! Vienna! have their place, but I become a little testy when so much attention is given to recreation and so little time is afforded to those this holiday is intended to honor. We flock to the beaches at this season of the year. Yet, what honor do we bestow on those who stormed beaches like Normandy to protect our freedoms?

Our Scripture lesson is part of a long section of John’s gospel called the “Farewell Discourse.” Jesus has just shared a Last Supper with his disciples. They don’t realize it’s their last meal with Jesus; only Jesus knows. The forces aligned against Jesus are mobilizing against him. Judas is excused from the supper to carry out his diabolical plan. The clock is now ticking. Jesus’ arrest is imminent.

Jesus’ only way out is to escape while there’s still time. If he lingers, he’ll be arrested and executed. Jesus doesn’t cut and run. He calmly shares this last meal with his disciples. He doesn’t act like a helpless victim. “No one takes my life from me,” he declares, “I lay my life down by my own accord” (John 10:18).

Since this is Jesus’ last hour, we lean in to hear what he has
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to say. “My command is this: love one another as I have loved you” (John 15:12). It’s a nice sentiment, the kind of cliché one might capture on a greeting card or memorialize on a plaque. Yet, in this decisive moment, I would have expected something more substantial. Love one another seems so ordinary and pedestrian.

But what Jesus says next raises the bar. “Greater love has no one than this; that he lay down his life for his friends” (John 15:13).

We socialize with friends. We entertain friends and share meals with them. We support each other when times are tough. But laying down our lives for our friends takes friendship to a whole new level.

Jesus said to his disciples, “A good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep” (John 10:11). Jesus contrasts a good shepherd with hired help, who are in it only for the money. They flee at the first whiff of danger. A good shepherd puts his life on the line for the welfare of the sheep (10:12).

Jesus doesn’t merely talk in hypothetical terms about laying down his life. He does it! His words look back to the sacrificial act of washing his disciples’ feet, in John 13. They also anticipate his act of self-sacrifice on the cross, in John 19.

I’m reminded of a Peanuts cartoon in which Lucy asks, “Schroeder, do you know what love is?” Schroeder is a rather precocious child, endlessly absorbed in playing the piano. He stops playing, gives her a questioning look and then answers, “Love is a noun which means ‘to be fond of, a strong affection for or attachment or devotion to a person or persons.’” With that, he sits down and resumes playing. Lucy is left mumbling to herself, “On paper, he is great.”

Some people look good on paper. Their resumes read well. Their on-line profile looks impressive. Yet, you meet them in person only to find they leave something to be desired. Jesus doesn’t merely look good on paper. He’s the real deal. He walks the talk. He practices what he preaches. He lays down his life for his friends.

This Memorial Day we honor people who paid a price for our freedom. There is no greater love than to lay down one’s life for someone else.

While in seminary, I came into contact with an adjunct faculty member, Elizabeth Elliot Leitch, who had formerly served in the missionary field and was married to Jim Elliot. Jim sensed God’s call into the foreign mission field in his teens. His interest narrowed to the Waodani Indians, members of the Auca tribe living in a remote region of Ecuador. Back in 1956, this tribe had no contact with the outside world. They were considered violent and dangerous.

Jim recruited four young men to join him in his mission.
Together, they launched Operation Auca. For months, they would fly their single prop plane, calling out friendly greetings and dropping gift baskets. They even gave one Auca Indian, whom they nicknamed George, a ride in their plane.

George, however, became suspicious of their intentions. When these five missionaries decided it was time to enter the village, they were massacred.

This is where the story takes an even more improbable turn. Jim’s wife, Elizabeth, and their young daughter, along with a sister of one of the slain missionaries, continued the mission. Eventually, they moved into the same village where the missionaries had been slain to share the love of Jesus. When the people witnessed this act of sacrificial love, they opened their hearts to Jesus. One of the first to do so went by the nickname George.

An entry from Jim Elliot’s journal gives us insight into what motivated them: “He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose.”

John writes, “This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for one another” (3:16).

Few of us will be called upon to give up our lives for someone else in a once-for-all gesture of heroic sacrifice. Rather, we’ll have countless opportunities to give our lives away, a little at a time. Instead of breaking the bank for someone else, we’ll likely give ourselves away a quarter at a time. John’s epistle doesn’t merely talk about laying down our lives in the abstract. The verse that follows this command issues forth in practical acts of kindness: “If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him?” (3:17).

You can’t maintain a healthy marriage without sacrifice. You can’t be happily married and remain selfish. I’ve tried and it doesn’t work!

You can’t raise healthy children without sacrifice. Expectant moms learn this right from the get-go. They accept a comfort and fashion demotion in exchange for carrying a baby. When the baby is born, the parents accept a sleep demotion. Infants depend upon parents making all sorts of sacrifices.

You can’t maintain healthy friendships without sacrifice. Friendships depend upon friends making time for one another.

There’s no shortcut. Making sacrifices is central to healthy marriages, strong friendships and well-adjusted children.

We’ve been preaching for some time now that life is messy. Interpersonal relationships can be incredibly messy. Sacrificial love can reverse the
Unselfishness can be a powerful change agent. Sacrificial love can revitalize loveless marriages. It can break up the logjam of embittered family tension. It can mend broken friendships. I’m not overstating the point! Laying down your life can make all the difference.

Let’s be honest. Laying down your life is hard, incredibly hard. It will take courage and humility on our part to give up our right to get even. We must let go of our desire to come out on top. But ask yourself what is most important. Is it the need to be right or is it the need to be reconciled? Do we want most to look good or do we want relationships to be restored?

Martin Luther King preached his last sermon in a Memphis church on April 3, 1968. It was the night before he was gunned down by James Earl Ray. The text for his sermon was the well-known parable of the Good Samaritan. King called upon people “to develop a kind of dangerous unselfishness.”

Unselfishness can be dangerous. It makes demands on our time. There are risks associated with laying down our lives. Ruthless people will seek to take advantage of us and try to walk all over us. But unselfishness can be a powerful change agent.

Martin Luther King closed his sermon with words that, as we look back on them now, almost seem as though he was delivering his own eulogy:

“Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I’m not concerned about that now. I just want to do God’s will. And he’s allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I’ve looked over. And I’ve seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight that we, as a people, will get to the Promised Land. And so I’m happy tonight. I’m not worried about anything. I’m not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.”

The last line of King’s sermon borrows from the Battle Hymn of the Republic, which we’ll use to close our service. Julia Ward Howe rewrote this campfire song in the wee hours of an 1862 summer night at the DC Willard Hotel. Her song is replete with Biblical imagery of God’s judgment on people who insist on perpetuating evils like slavery. Her song includes the memorable line, “As he died to make men holy, let us die to make men free.”

“There is no greater love than this, than to lay down your life for somebody else.” There is no greater love. No greater love!