

LAYING DOWN YOUR LIFE

[Jesus said] “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away—and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd. For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father.”

John 10: 11-18

One of the earliest painted images of Jesus comes from the Catacomb of Callixtus in Rome, painted on the ceiling of an underground burial chamber sometime around the end of the 2nd century or beginning of the 3rd century. It is not intended to be a portrait in the sense of showing us what Jesus really looked like. Rather, it reveals something of how these earliest Christians understood the nature of Jesus, casting him in the role of a shepherd, a pastor of their souls, the one who guides them even through the dark valley of the shadow of death.

There are other images in the catacombs, such as the raising of Lazarus, the three men in the fiery furnace, and Jonah being expelled from the great fish—all of them images that celebrate some sort of deliverance, a victory over the powers of death. But the good shepherd was not only the earliest, it was perhaps the most popular depiction of Jesus.

And it shouldn't be surprising. It is one of the most prominent images in the Bible—a metaphor that imagines the relationship between God and the people of God in terms of the more familiar relationship between shepherd and sheep. Our call to worship today quotes Psalm 100, which says that “we are God's people, the sheep of God's pasture.” Sometimes that relationship is played out in the history of Israel, with leaders of God's people being depicted as shepherds, and not always good shepherd.

But in our gospel reading today, Jesus himself is the good shepherd, and John focuses on the willingness of the shepherd to lay down his life for the sheep. He contrasts this with the hired hand, who at the first hint of danger, runs away in order to preserve his own life, even at the peril of the sheep in his care. It's not just that the hired hand is a coward; it's simply that the hired hand has no abiding relationship with the sheep. To him sheep are just a liability or a commodity, and certainly not worth losing his own life over.

But the good shepherd has a different relationship. It is not a relationship based on power, or economics, or ethnicity, or the obligations of kinship. It is a covenant relationship, a relationship of faithfulness. This is what distinguishes this shepherd not only from the hired hand, but from other shepherds. The good shepherd is faithful; he doesn't run away, and he doesn't put his own life ahead of the sheep. He is willing to risk his life for the sheep not because of their value in terms of their wool production or lamb chops. Their value is not measured in their usefulness or utility, but simply in their being. Their worth is measured by the shepherd's willingness to equate the value of his own life with the life of his sheep.

In this particular use of the shepherd and sheep metaphor, Jesus defines not just God's relationship with the world—he sets out a vision of the nature of all relationships, and overturns all notions of relationship in terms of power and control and transaction. The good shepherd metaphor gives us a vision of leaders whose fulfillment comes in seeing that the sheep in their care flourish, leaders who will do whatever it takes, giving themselves to the fullest, to see to the well-being of their flock.

The vision we are given in this parable is one of how—when we follow Christ, when we become Christ-like—how it is that we live in the world, and how we see ourselves in relationship to others, not only as leaders but also as partners, as fellow-travelers, as members of a community. And as John reminds us in his short letter, “we know love by this, that [Christ] laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another.” (1 John 3: 16)

But let's be very clear here. Laying down your life is not the same as having your life taken from you by force and violence. In fact, it doesn't necessarily mean losing your life in a literal, physical way. It is not so much about *ending* life as offering up the whole of the life that has been given to you. And it's not something that we do just once; it's an opportunity that arises every day.

Think of a parent who sits up all night by the bed of a sick child, laying aside their own self for the sake of the well-being of their child. Think of those who build houses for Habitat for Humanity, offering up their strength, their time, their skills, their sweat, sometimes for a complete stranger. Think of those who mentor young people—who give not just their time but give themselves, make themselves available to walk with a young person through the struggles and joys of growing up or discovering their faith. Think of those who put on a uniform and risk their lives to defend the freedom and preserve the safety of others. Think of the young adults who take to the streets of our cities and who literally put their lives on the line for the cause of justice and an end to gun violence.

Think of our mission partner, Jim McGill, who has dedicated his life to helping people in some harsh and sometimes hostile environments in Niger and South Sudan, so that they and their communities can have the kind of clean water we take for granted every day. Or think of any number of people who have given part of their own life to help you become who you are today.

These examples are certainly generous and kind people, but this is not just about generosity and kindness. It is about seeing yourself in the world in a particular way, seeing the purpose and meaning and fulfillment of your life in terms of the sacrificial and suffering love of Christ the Good Shepherd, and realizing that laying down your life, offering yourself for the sake of others, does not diminish but enhances your life.

We honor those who have risked their lives or even sacrificed their lives in defense of the freedom of others. We are inspired by those who have been martyrs for the cause of civil rights—people like Medgar Evers and Martin Luther King, Jr. And maybe someday you may be called to risk your life for others in the same way, too. Or it may be as simple as setting aside some of the unearned privileges we benefit from at the expense of the full life of others.

Every day, in many small ways, we are given the opportunity to lay down our lives, to make ourselves available, to see our lives as a gift, not an achievement, a gift to be shared with others. Whenever you lay down your life in this way, you may begin to understand what Jesus means when he says no one takes his life; he lays it down in order to take it up, to live it out to its deepest purpose and fullest meaning.

The relationship that Jesus describes when he uses this metaphor of the good shepherd is not about skillfully managing a flock and only partly about protecting helpless sheep from the dangers of a hostile world. More than anything, it is a model for how relationships are given their truest meaning and our identity is shaped in laying down our lives for others, in offering our life for the sake of the world. And to the extent that we participate in this sacred dynamic, we not only imitate the Good Shepherd, we also participate in the divine love of Christ that dwells in each one of us.

May it be so.

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