

Readings & Sermon April 21, 2024
Fourth Sunday of Easter/Good Shepherd Sunday
Pastor Jaime Larson-McLoone
“Living definitions of love.”



We know love by this - that Jesus laid down his life for us. But first let's get one thing out of the way: Most of us are not called to be martyrs. If we are not sure how to go about putting our love into action, laying down our times for the sake of others is a good and faithful place to start. And sometimes that will be all we have to offer.

1 John 3:16-24

Jesus' death on our behalf is the clearest demonstration of divine love. This is the very love we share with others, not just through our words but especially through our deeds. In sharing such love we fulfill God's commandments.

We know love by this, that [Jesus Christ] laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. 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?

Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action. And by this we will know that we are from the truth and will reassure our hearts before him whenever our hearts condemn us; for God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything. Beloved, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have boldness before God; and we receive from him whatever we ask, because we obey his commandments and do what pleases him.

And this is his commandment, that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us. All who obey his

commandments abide in him, and he abides in them. And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit that he has given us.

John 10:11-19

In language that recalls the twenty-third psalm, Jesus describes himself as the shepherd who cares for his sheep. He is willing to die for them, and he is able to overcome death for them.

[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.”

Sermon by Pastor Jaime Larson-McLoone

“Living definitions of love.”

One of my favorite morning news segments is called Kindness 101. For each installment, reporter Steve Hartman and two of his kids focus on one word that has something to do with kindness. Words like purpose, respect, friendship, and inclusion.

Steve’s son Emmett sits at “the dictionary desk,” and he offers a definition of the word. But words aren’t enough. Each time, the definition is followed by a story, a story of someone who is a living definition of that day’s word. Because kindness is more than words. Kindness is revealed in actions.

Just like love is more than words. Love is revealed in actions.

And Jesus, our Good Shepherd, is the living definition of love. We know love by this - that Jesus laid down his life for us. And so, we hear today, we ought to lay down our lives for one another.

But first let's get one thing out of the way: Most of us are not called to be martyrs. Maybe none of us here today are called to be martyrs. So it's important to remember that even before Jesus laid down his life for us on the cross, he spent his ministry loving the world by laying down his life for others.

In Jesus, God laid down the privileges of divinity to be born a human.

At a wedding in Cana, Jesus told his mother, "My hour has not yet come." The time wasn't right. But still, he turned water into wine so that a joyful celebration could continue.

A Pharisee named Nicodemus came to Jesus with questions - questions that showed he just didn't get what Jesus was up to - and still Jesus took the time to listen and explain and teach. He laid down any inclination to demand that Nicodemus just get on board.

Jesus took the long way to Galilee, purposefully passing through enemy territory, so he could meet a Samaritan woman at a well, hear her story, and offer her living water. He laid down the assumptions of his tradition and culture about who was welcome and worthy.

Jesus healed. He fed. He forgave - in ways that made him unpopular with the leaders of the day. Just before today's gospel reading, Jesus gave sight to a man who was born blind. It caused such a controversy among the religious leaders, that the man was thrown out of his synagogue. And Jesus welcomes him in. Like a Good Shepherd.

Not once does Jesus say, "Look, I'm on my way to die on the cross. That is what I'm here for. I don't have time for you people and your earthly, human problems."

The Good Shepherd lays down his life - throughout his life. That is what love looks like. And our Good Shepherd is the living definition of love.

We respond in gratitude by laying down our lives – throughout our lives. So what does that look like? The writer of First John tells us that love...the laying-down-our-lives kind of love...looks like sharing what we have with those who are in need. And that requires us to realize what we have. To realize that God has provided us with an abundance of good things. And to notice the ways we can provide for our neighbors in need out of that abundance.

Sometimes that will look like sharing money or food, shelter or professional expertise. Laying down our lives might mean sacrificing our material wants to meet our neighbors' material needs. Other times, we follow Jesus' example of sacrificial love by laying down our time for the sake of others – by providing things like friendship or encouragement.

Laying down our lives as a way of life won't necessarily look extravagant or even impressive. The most recent Kindness 101 story is about a simple hug from a four-year-old that restored a grieving widower's sense of purpose and sparked a life-giving friendship. It was a mutual laying down of lives. Because sometimes we have to lay down our pride or our stubbornness and receive what our neighbors have to offer.

In my own life, I think of someone who once sent me an encouraging note – along with a lament that encouragement was all they could offer at the time. But all they could offer was exactly what I needed in that moment. And I still have that note – along with lots of other encouraging notes I've received over the years from people who laid down their time to share their love – in words and actions.

If we are not sure how to go about putting our love into action, laying down our times for the sake of others is a good and faithful place to start. And sometimes that will be all we have to offer. But sometimes laying down our lives will require a little more risk - or make us a little more uncomfortable. In a divided, broken world, we might be called to lay down our lives in ways that make us unpopular.

For the sake of love, we might need to lay down our assumptions about who belongs, or who we think needs to change their beliefs or behavior in order to belong fully.

We might need to lay down our iPads or remote controls or whatever devices connect us to all those stories about all there is to fear in this world. And then we might need to lay down our desire for comfort, go out into the world and meet the people there - people like us who God loves dearly. People for whom Jesus laid down his life.

We might need to lay down our ideas of what other people need or our reliance on what works for us. We might need to lay down our expertise and ask others how we can help - and then listen when they tell us. We might need to lay down what we are sure we know - and be open to learning. And for some folks, that will feel like death. Like literally laying down our lives.

But here's the Good News: Our Good Shepherd walks with us through the valley of the shadow of death. So we can be confident we will emerge safely. And we will learn that when we lay down our lives for the sake of love, Jesus is with us. Providing safety and rest, water to drink and food to eat. Protecting us from enemies - and our perceived enemies - maybe even bringing us together for a meal.

Jesus shepherds us. He shows us what love looks like. And he guides us, provides for us and protects us as we practice growing in love. And bit by bit, sheep by sheep, by bringing all of his diverse sheep together into one flock, a living definition of love.

Pastor Jaime

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