

Laying Down Your Life

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New Song Episcopal Church

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(All lectionary passages are included below the sermon text.)

Today's passages reminded me of a moment in my life. It was 2008. I had spent the previous seven years living in Morocco and was leaving the country, moving back to the United States. I had sent my family ahead of me as traveling would be easier for them than dealing with living in an empty house amidst the chaos of dealing with the final details of an international move. I had packed up all of my belongings into a shipping container and spent a week going from government office to government office to get the correct form signed so that Morocco would release the container. I was stressed. I was alone. I was exhausted.

Once the details were worked out, I took my tired body to the airport to fly out. I don't remember how I got to the airport, but I know I didn't drive. I had given my car to a family that didn't have one. Maybe they took me, I honestly can't recall.

I checked one suitcase and had a carry-on bag containing some vital paperwork and my laptop. I made it on to the plane and slumped into my seat. I am sure I slept for hours over the Atlantic.

We arrived in the United States. I was shaky and a little delirious. I did not understand at that time that I have a chronic illness, Ehlers-Danlos Syndrome, that requires more rest and less stress than most people if I am to feel okay and be healthy. I had been living in a high stress, limited rest environment for a long time, surviving especially that last week on a combination of caffeine and adrenaline.

I filled out the customs form. I was carrying very little with me, so it was quick

and easy. Then, as I approached the security checkpoint to move to the next section of the airport for my domestic flight connection, I had a scare.

I pulled out my laptop to place it in the x-ray machine and saw a sticker on it in Arabic. It said:

ليس لاحد حب اعظم من هذا ان يضع احد نفسه لاجل احبائه.

That is from John's Gospel, chapter 15, verse 13. "Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends."

In Arabic. Written on a sticker. On MY laptop. While in an American airport. Approaching a security checkpoint where I had to take the laptop out and place it on the conveyor belt. Yeah, I was stressed even further than I had been.

Shockingly, I was able to discreetly remove the sticker and throw it in a trash can without looking suspicious and somehow got past the checkpoint without so much as a second glance. Truly, goodness and mercy do follow me all the days of my life.

It makes me sad that such a beautiful sentiment has been spoiled by the selfish and cruel actions of our world.

We live in an age when the beauty of selflessly giving ourselves over to love and serve our neighbor has been perverted into a pervasive fear of suicide bombing and terrorism.

How do we, living in such a context, understand the words of today's readings? Even moreso, how do we communicate their meaning when the words can so easily give the wrong impression?

We serve. With love and kindness.

We help when and where we can.

We act when we see need. Sometimes that means acting even when we don't feel

like it or think we don't have the energy, resources, or the desire.

We cannot solve every problem. We cannot get involved in every opportunity. However, we can choose to be mindful of what is in front of us. We can choose to help with things where we can, being aware that we must take care of ourselves as well.

We can't do everything, but we can do something. We can give of ourselves to the cause of making the lives of those around us a little bit better each time we interact.

A kind word. A gentle reply. A smile. Acknowledging someone else's existence and struggle. Giving a dollar to a street musician, an unopened cold bottle of water to a homeless person, a hand up to someone in need.

I have learned the hard way that I have physical limitations that are not obvious. As a younger man, I ignored them, frequently to my peril. Today, with a family depending on me and armed with a deeper understanding of my physical needs, I am more careful. But I still do what I can, occasionally to my detriment.

Nearly 2,000 years ago [Rabbi Tarfon](#) said, "It is not your responsibility to finish the work, but neither are you free to desist from it." (In [Perkei Avot 2:16](#), which is one of the works that make up the [Mishnah](#).)

This, my friends, is laying down our lives. This is loving, not in words or in speech, but in truth and action.

May God give each of us eyes to see the opportunities to serve that lay in front of us and wisdom to know which ones to act upon and the best way of doing so.

Amen.

Acts 4:5-12

The rulers, elders, and scribes assembled in Jerusalem, with Annas the high priest, Caiaphas, John, and Alexander, and all who were of the high-priestly family. When they had made the prisoners stand in their midst, they inquired, "By what power or by what name did you do this?" Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, "Rulers of the people and elders, if we are questioned today because of a

good deed done to someone who was sick and are asked how this man has been healed, let it be known to all of you, and to all the people of Israel, that this man is standing before you in good health by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead. This Jesus is `the stone that was rejected by you, the builders; it has become the cornerstone.'

There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved."

Psalm 23

Dominus regit me

1 The LORD is my shepherd; *
I shall not be in want.

2 He makes me lie down in green pastures *
and leads me beside still waters.

3 He revives my soul *
and guides me along right pathways for his Name's sake.

4 Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I shall fear no evil; *
for you are with me;
your rod and your staff, they comfort me.

5 You spread a table before me in the presence of those who trouble me; *
you have anointed my head with oil,
and my cup is running over.

6 Surely your goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, *
and I will dwell in the house of the LORD for ever.

1 John 3:16-24

We know love by this, that he 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 10:11-18

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."