

A Sermon for DaySpring
by Eric Howell
The Great Chain of True Love
John 15:9-17
May 9, 2021

Today we are reading from John's Gospel. John's Gospel is most well-known and well-loved for its most famous verse: God so loved the world. Love captivates us. Love inspires us. Love and the desire for it shapes our lives. Love gives us hope in today and in the days to come no matter what we face. Every time the church gathers together, each person ought to be able to walk out having heard the message, "I am a person Jesus loves." You are, indeed. You are a person Jesus loves.

"God so loved the world, God gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life." John 3.16. John's Gospel feels like it's anchored on that verse, that saying of Jesus declaring that in the cosmic scope of God's creative power, in the historical sweep of God's redeeming work, in the topsy-turvy, unpredictable, sometimes too-painful-to-be-believed lives we live, God's love is an anchor holding us from drifting away, a rock on which our feet can stand, a vine flowing life to the branches, a cross on which the Son of God gave his life for those whom he loved.

Abide in my love. Jesus says this word over and over. The disciples are with him on the night he shared his last supper with them and then went to the garden where he would be betrayed and arrested. This is the end. *Abide in me. Abide in my love. Remain in me.* Listen to this passage even a little with the ears of your heart, and you can hear the emotion dripping. *Stay with me. Remain in me. Remain in my love.* Whatever happens, hold on to the anchor, keep your feet sure on the solid rock, let the branch draw its life on the vine, stay in my love.

To abide in Jesus' love is to have full focus on him, his teachings, his spirit, his presence. In his love, we are to love one another.

"But love is tough right? Sometimes it's hard to love other people, sometimes it's harder to love ourselves, and sometimes it's even hard to love Jesus when we want to rebel against his way or one of his commandments. So, what do we do? We keep on. We keep trying. We try again every single day until one day we find that our abiding seems as natural as drawing breath. Jesus has chosen us, so we can trust him to help us abide in love.

In his love, we are to love one another and find our joy. Yes, joy. *I have said these things that your joy may be complete.* Joy is the wonderful byproduct of true love. As you know there are so many imposters to both love and joy. So many shadows, so many deadends we can find ourselves, and have found ourselves chasing the shadows of joy and only finding regret; chasing the imposter of love and only finding emptiness. True love bears the fruit of joy.

What is true love? *No one has greater love than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends.*

One's life is, in the Greek *psyche*, one's psyche is your whole self, your essential being, your totality. To lay down can have many meanings: it's used for laying down your sword before your ruler as an act of surrender or show of loyalty; to lay down can also be an offering on the altar. You lay down your sacrifice on the altar. So, to lay down your life can mean many things. And, indeed, we lay down our lives in many, many ways.

One of the best examples is the example of having and raising children. From the moment a couple has their first child, unless they are very selfish or very calloused, they will find themselves laying down their lives daily. Every time they rise from sleep in the middle of the night, or turn around, tiny and not so tiny hands are stretched out and never so tiny voices are unleashed, asking something of them—their milk, their time, their comfort, their protection, their energy, their money, their car keys, their understanding, their hearts. Parenthood is a journey of self-giving love. (Rolheiser) We lay down our lives in love.

This too is signified by Baptism, in which we are lowered into the tomb-like waters, trusting grace to lift us up again to walk in new life. Love is baptismal. It is letting go as a journey of diminishment toward nothingness, at least nothing we cling to of our own. True love is always a letting go, a giving up, and a trusting in the arms of grace. It is never claiming more for myself; it is always giving of self. Jesus says this is the greatest love.

Modern English translations generalize John 15:13 like my translation does, "Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends." Others deliver the English in non-gender specific terms, "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends." I'm not opposed to either of those efforts. It does apply to all who have ears to hear and follow Jesus on this radical love-giving way, and efforts to include men and women in our translations is good for us all, both men and women.

But in some cases, like this one, something's lost in the meaning when we don't hear it in the old ways of translating the verse. Something's lost that is worth remembering. So the old translations read something like this, "Greater love has no one than this: that a man lay down his life for his friends." Before we universalize and generalize this as a calling upon our lives—as parents, as baptized disciples, as friends, which it certainly is, we ought to hear it the way the disciples heard it that night on the lips and from the heart of Jesus and how they remembered it, remember--the night he was betrayed. Hear the words of Jesus about himself and the great love dwelling in him, flowing through him, and leading him from that night on to the cross.

The shape of God's love, the shape of the greatest love is the cross. The cross, where Jesus laid down his life. That's the place where his freedom was surrendered, his power sacrificed, his desire to live was given over to those who desired him to die. Greater love has no one than this, that a man, *this* man, lay down his life for his friends, and you are my friends if you do what I command you.

John Shea writes, as “people grasp and understand themselves as links in the love chain—from the Father to Jesus, from Jesus to them, from them to one another—they move...into holy communion. There is no need to grab or hold or possess this life, as if it were a scarce commodity. It is abundant beyond measure. God does not measure the Spirit. If you know this, in the deep sense of having comprehended and enacted this law of the love chain, you have grasped what Jesus is ultimately about. And if you know what Jesus is ultimately about, you will know what the Father is ultimately about. (Shea, *The Spiritual Wisdom of the Gospels, Year B*, 133).

Every act of sacrificial love take part in the divine love of God flowing through Jesus to all creation. When you give of yourself to someone else you are taking part in the greatest love of all. And you are, I know you are, willingly laying down your life in a thousand ways for your children, your parents, your community, your students, for complete strangers. As you do you become aware of all the ways your life is made possible by all who have laid down their life for you.

May you have joy in your place in the great chain of true love. And may God give you joy, deep, abiding joy, as the fruit of the laying down of your life in the name of Jesus, who gave his life for us.

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