Laying down his life

* [Acts 4:5-12](http://www.lectionarypage.net/YearB_RCL/Easter/BEaster4_RCL.html#ot1)
* [1 John 3:16-24](http://www.lectionarypage.net/YearB_RCL/Easter/BEaster4_RCL.html#nt1)
* [John 10:11-18](http://www.lectionarypage.net/YearB_RCL/Easter/BEaster4_RCL.html#gsp1)
* [Psalm 23](http://www.lectionarypage.net/YearB_RCL/Easter/BEaster4_RCL.html#ps1)

Todays gospel is such a comforting passage about the Good Shepherd, and one we use for memorial services as we remind ourselves that God’s love never waivers even when we journey through the valley of death.

In the words of John’s gospel, Jesus tells us clearly that “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.” Jesus could have used his Godly powers to avoid being crucified, to avoid being lynched and killed. Yet he did not.

He used his will – he chose – to be killed out of love for the cosmos which includes humanity, and it seems especially out of love for humanity.

It is difficult for us to understand how Jesus laying down his life brings salvation to the world. It has always been difficult. Paul talked about Christ crucified – the Messiah hanging from a tree – as a stumbling block for Jew and foolishness for Greeks. What is it for us today? I suspect that most of us would rather move on – we don’t want to spend time thinking about unpleasant things. And yet Jesus’ death is central to our understanding of God and God’s way in the world.

The New Testament lesson picks up the theme of laying down one’s life and applies it directly to us, “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.”

This is how we know love – not in an abundance of gifts, not in feeling good, but that Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And consequently, that is also how we get to live – loving not in word or speech but in truth and action. And when we do this, the first letter of John goes on to say,” we will know that we are from the truth and will reassure our hearts before him whenever our hearts condemn us.”

Now the Lutherans among us might think that I am straying horribly close to works righteousness – the idea that we are reconciled to God by what we do rather than through God’s gift. But no, the thread here is that just as Jesus laid down his life consciously and intentionally, so we get to lay down our lives consciously and intentionally. Our response to God’s grace is to live lives of love for God and our neighbor.

It’s hard to do. In a world that is constantly bombarding us with ways that we can get more and better things or have more and better experiences, more and better food, become more and better through a myriad opportunities, it is hard for us to stop being self-centered. It is hard for us to move off our own reactions, hopes and fears in order to serve others. Our little egos get in the way. Even when we are doing something loving we long to be noticed for it, we want it to be done our way, and are hurt when the person does not receive our gift in a suitably grateful manner.

Laying down our little egos is vital as we seek to grow closer to God and become more and more Christlike. And becoming more Christlike enables us to let go of petty grievances and work for the reign of God.

In the last year we have become deeply aware of the legacy of slavery and Jim Crow laws in the racism that is engrained in American society, and we have become much more aware of the continued and growing existence of white supremacist ideas and groups. Many of these groups conflate religion and politics to create a powerful ideology which has been called Christian Nationalism.

The Klu Klux Klan used a distortion of Christianity to justify the scapegoating, terrorizing, torture and murder of black people. Christian Nationalism is a continuation of the same mindset. It seeks to keep and maintain power over others; by using the idea that Patriots or Christians are victims of an unfair society it justifies the use of hatred and force to set things right and put the so-called victims back on top.

But this is completely wrong. I cannot say strongly enough that this kind of “Christianity” is not something that we can condone.

Because it is not following the Christ who laid down his life for us – the Christ who was an innocent victim but allowed himself to be scapegoated. If we are disciples of Jesus, then we get to lay down our lives for others. The bizarre paradox of Christianity is that by becoming weak, by allowing himself to be killed, Christ brought life, hope and salvation. If people are attempting to get power over others, then they are not following Christ. Because powerlessness is the essence of the cross.

Back to the New Testament reading: “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.” Following Christ means loving God and loving others and loving the planet in a humble self-giving way even when it is not our first choice. This was the secret of the Civil Right movement – that they came from love. They saw the white folk who were persecuting them as misguided and sought to love and forgive them even when they were beaten and imprisoned.

We are privileged people; all of us have more privilege than most of the world’s population, than most of God’s children. As followers of Christ we are called to lay that privilege down – to examine closely how the way we live and the attitudes we have continue to oppress others, both human and non-human, and be ready to make amends.

I have talked this morning of Christian Nationalism and I confess that I have a slight feeling of superiority, even of smugness, that I am not like that, that I don’t follow their false Christianity. But these are our sisters and brothers who are misguided. We get to love them even as we stand non-violently against any ideology that perpetuates violence or declares one group to be subordinate. Jesus said “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.”

That is our life work, people of God, because it is God’s great work, to bring all beings into reconciliation, into balance, into unity. Not by use of force but by gentleness, following in the path of the Good Shepherd.