

1 John 3: 16-24
John 10: 11-18
April 26, 2015
Hamilton Union Presbyterian Church

A consistent theme in John's gospel is that Jesus lays down his life for humanity. And as we hear in John's first letter the proclamation and teaching does not end with Jesus. John tells his followers that as Jesus lay down his life for us, so we must lay down our lives for one another. It is this laying aside of our lives for others that marks the true community of Jesus' followers. It is this quality of relationship that allows the world who does not know Jesus to discover the living reality of his resurrection in this time and place. It is the quality of laying down our individual lives for the good of someone else and for the greater community that distinguishes the spiritual community of Jesus from the "eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth" reactivity of the pull apart world. It is this quality of laying aside our life that provides the spark by which the power of Jesus dead and alive again jumps to new generations—to the sheep other than us who live apart from the gospel.

All this may sound good in theory. But what does it mean in the so-called *real world*? What does it mean for us to lay down our lives for one another? We know what it meant for Jesus. It meant rejection, torture and excruciating pain such that death was a release. Is that what he means? Does being a follower of Jesus mean looking for opportunities to be crucified like he was?

You may be surprised to know that in the early days of the church people actually did take this literally. They would go to the nearest Roman soldier and declare that they were Christians in the expectation that they would be arrested and killed just like Jesus. At first the

romans were all too willing to oblige. As a result church leaders became concerned. First of all they worried that if this martyrdom craze became too popular there might not be enough people to carry the message to the world and to future generations. But of more concern was the subtle distortion to the gospel that was developing in the glorification of literal dying for Jesus.

Think about it. Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth and the *life*..." John 3:16 reads, "For God loved the world so much that he gave his only son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have everlasting *life*." In chapter 20 John states as the purpose of his gospel: "Now Jesus did many other things in the presence of the disciples which are *not* written in this book; *but these are written* that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Christ and, through believing, *have life in his name*."

The point of God sending Jesus to become human is that God's life may become our living reality. God sends Jesus into the world not for some great reward after a life of woe and suffering. God created humanity to recognize that life is a gift *from God*. We are meant to enjoy the gift and give thanks to the one who daily gives the gift. Yes, we believe that this life continues past the moment of death. But the life we will experience in heaven is *the same life we have now*; only in the life of heaven that life will be transformed in ways we can only imagine. Listen to the verse just before the passage we heard from John: "I (have come) that they (the sheep) may have life, and have it abundantly." Not in some pie in the sky future; but right here and now.

So, what then might it mean for us to "lay down" our lives as Jesus laid down his life? Let me ask some questions:

What is more important: Rushing to take a parking space ahead of someone else, or letting that person take it and have a little longer walk to the store?

What is more important: Winning an argument at all costs or allowing the possibility that someone may have a point?

What is more important: Prolonging an argument with increasingly personal and hurtful comments, or stopping, admitting where you are wrong and asking for forgiveness?

What is more important: Hanging on to anger and rehearsing the memory of past hurts at the cost of friendship, or seeking reconciliation?

What is more important, living a double life and being afraid of being discovered, or being honest about who we are and risking rejection?

What is more important: Judging people who believe differently than we do, or learning to listen to the outlook of another?

What is more important: worrying about what will happen to *me* or being more concerned with the well-being of somebody else?

This list is just a beginning. But each question involves the question of whether for the sake of witnessing to the love of God in Jesus Christ we are willing to *lay aside* our lives, our needs, and our desire to be in control and in the center of things *in order that* someone else may experience the life of Christ. And as we begin in small ways to relinquish this self-oriented life to the greater life of Jesus we discover a miraculous thing: we have a life much richer and more meaningful than anything we experienced before.

We receive the promise that Jesus made to his disciples: the one who seeks to hold on to his or her life will find that life slipping through their fingers. The one who is willing to release

that self-oriented life for Jesus' sake will discover the life that *really is life* which no power on earth can ever take away. In this way as well, the sheep who have no shepherd will find shelter and life that is precious and freely given. Amen.