

WHAT (WHOM) WOULD YOU DIE FOR?

(09/12/2021)

Scripture Lesson: John 15:1-17

“No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.” (Jn.15:13)

This summer, we have been pursuing two themes in our worship: a Bible study of the Gospel of Mark, and the wilderness experience as a time of potential spiritual and psychological transformation. This morning, I would like to step aside from those themes to address something in the news this past week that drew my attention.

C’mon, Man! I can see you rolling your eyes even with your masks on—you assume that this is going to be about the New York Yankees! It isn’t, perhaps because the Yankees have stunk over the last two weeks. After winning 13 straight they lost 11 of their last 14, giving those of us who root for them a small taste of what life is like for a manic-depressive—or a Boston Red Sox fan!

By the way, two weeks ago I discovered how to get your attention! For one brief, shining moment, I even had my wife’s attention. After the service, she told me she thought I was going to announce that I had decided to pursue my dream to join a refugee Tibetan Buddhist monastery in the foothills of the Himalaya in Nepal just southwest of the Tibetan border, the monastery that Corey and I visited in 1999. I would teach them English and teach them about Jesus; they would teach me Tibetan and teach me about Buddha. She apparently thought that I was stupid enough to believe that by disclosing my intention, springing it on her during a worship service, she wouldn’t be upset. I might not be the sharpest bowling ball in the drawer, but I’m not *that* stupid! But, again, that’s not the point.

This morning, I would like us to consider an existential question. The question is: Whom would you die for? What would you die for? If ending a sentence with a preposition bothers you, and I know it does for at least two English teachers who are here this morning, let me rephrase the questions: for whom or for what would you make what is considered the ultimate sacrifice? Who or what, for you, is more important than life?

This past Monday, an Associated Press release caught my attention. Last Sunday in Lakeland, Florida, Brian Riley, a former Marine, killed four people, including a man, a thirty-three-year-old mother, the baby she cradled, the infant’s 62-year-old grandmother, the family dog, and he also shot an eleven-year-old girl several times in what was described as a random shooting spree. Riley, who was captured after a shootout with police, told them that the victims pleaded for their lives, but he shot them anyway.

There are several ways we could go with this story. Riley served as a sharpshooter in Afghanistan. We could reflect on what the experience of war does to the human psyche, how the deaths of enemy combatants and innocent civilians in Iraq and Afghanistan following September 11 weighs on the souls of our soldiers and on our souls. If you recall, more members of our military died from suicide after the Vietnam War than died in combat, and thousands of our young men and women have committed suicide following their tours in Iraq and Afghanistan.

But these aren't the points I would like to make. Hidden in the article was a line that caught my attention. Mr. Riley, who was suffering from "mental health issues" and, according to his girlfriend, had been "unraveling for several weeks," was armed to the teeth. He barricaded the house and set up glowsticks along the path leading up to the front door to draw police officers into an ambush. As Riley was in the process of surrendering to the police, we read:

. . . officers heard cries for help inside the home but were unsure whether there were additional shooters and feared the home was booby-trapped. A brave sergeant rushed in and grabbed an 11-year-old girl who had been shot at least seven times.

A brave sergeant rushed in and grabbed the little girl. That's the line that caught my attention.

The terrorist attack on September 11 and the consequent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, with their staggering number of casualties, bring us face to face with the matter of values, the ultimate values of our life. They challenge us to think about what is of ultimate importance to us, about what it means to be human, and about what God wants us to do with our life. Jesus, through both his words and his actions, raised these questions as a teaching for his disciples.

There are no single correct answers to these questions. They are questions that are posed to us as individuals by life. Most parents would die in place of their child, but it is questionable whether a child should die in place of a parent. Jesus says that one of the marks of great love is to lay down our life for a friend. This makes Jesus' sacrifice for us, his friends, especially meaningful. In any event, our response to these questions tells us something about how we understand the meaning of life in general and our individual life.

There are some causes for which we should not sacrifice our life. For a sacrifice to be meaningful, it needs to make a difference. In the case of sacrificing what is

precious to us, it should make a big difference. This is the reason why Galileo was smart to recant and avoid being burned at the stake.

I'm sure you know the story. For several thousand years, we believed that our little planet was the center of the entire universe. We believed that everything: the sun, the moon, the planets, and the stars revolved around us. This way of thinking, which was transmitted from Ptolemy through Aristotle to Thomas Aquinas was accepted as religious dogma. In the sixteenth century, the Polish astronomer Nicholas Copernicus realized that the difficulties mapping the orbits of the heavenly bodies could be easily solved if we placed the sun rather than the earth in the center of our solar system.

Copernicus, who was a Roman Catholic priest, knew that he would get into hot water if he were to publish his findings. They were only released following his death, and they were then quickly suppressed. A century later, Galileo, through the use of a telescope, was able to prove that Copernicus was correct. The sun was the center of our solar system; the earth and all the other planets revolved around the sun; and most planets had moons that revolved around them.

The church was not thrilled to have its dogma called into question by science. The Inquisition declined Galileo's offer to look through his telescope to see if what he said was true. Instead, they tied him to a stake, piled wood around him, and gave him one last opportunity to recant. It is rumored that Galileo looked at the wood, the flaming torch, and said, "I see my mistake. I now see that the earth, not the sun, is the center of the solar system." It is rumored that after this public recantation he muttered into his beard, "But it really is the other way around."

Galileo teaches us that it does not make sense to die for a scientific truth. Our death makes no difference. For example, you know that $2 + 3 = 5$. If someone holds a gun to your head and tells you to say that $2 + 3 = 6$, I hope to God you would do so! Your death would make absolutely no difference to you or to the field of mathematics.

Contrast this with the faith of the early Christian martyrs who chose to be torn to pieces by wild animals rather than renounce their faith. They apparently felt that renouncing their faith and denying their Lord was too great a price to pay for saving their life. I think of the several thousand Tibetan Buddhist monks and nuns who have doused themselves with gasoline and set themselves on fire, who have engaged in self-immolation to protest the Chinese occupation of their land. They believe in their cause so deeply that they are willing to die a horrible and painful death in its service. For most of us, there are people, usually members of our family, for whom we would give our life without a moment's hesitation.

The men and women of our armed forces have made such a choice. When they enlist, they are not signing up to die. They hope that they and their comrades will return home safely with mission accomplished. However, they know that they *could* die in the line of duty. They are willing to fight, perhaps even to kill another human being, something that is difficult to do even when the other person is a designated enemy, in the service of their country. They often pay a heavy price for this choice.

I don't want to turn this sermon into a political statement, but I want to say that we have a sacred commitment to these men and women. First, and this is one issue that impacts our decision to withdraw our troops from Afghanistan, we must be sure that we put them in harm's way only when it is *absolutely necessary*. I am not a big fan of our military excursions following 9/11. For family members who lose loved ones in the service of a questionable cause, the realization that their loved one died unnecessarily only compounds the loss. It fills them with anger as well as grief.

Second, we need to do a better job of taking care of the men and women who return from battle deeply wounded both physically and emotionally. We need to care for them and for their families. We need to provide psychotherapy and other services to help them heal from PTSD, traumatic brain injury, depression, dissociative experiences, the loss of limbs, alcoholism and/or other addictions. Third, we need a GI Bill to help them obtain the education and/or job training that will enable them to reintegrate into society.

The men and women in our armed forces volunteer to put themselves in harm's way in defense of our country, what it is and what it stands for. Through their service they affirm that some values are higher than happiness, pleasure, safety, and security. They believe "our way of life" is such a value. By this they do not mean materialism and conspicuous consumption. They mean values like freedom and democracy, unalienable rights not only for us but also for people around the world. They believe that enabling women and girls in Afghanistan to be treated as human beings, to obtain an education, to engage in the process of self-actualization, is something that is worth fighting and even dying for.

Some evolutionary biologists believe that our highest value as individuals is self-preservation. This is what Richard Dawkins, a brilliant scientist and self-proclaimed atheist, proclaims in his book *The Selfish Gene*. Dawkins believes that our highest value is our own self-interest, and all our activities are directed toward this end.

So why do some people become fire fighters? There are certainly less dangerous ways to earn a living. Why do some people like Beverly Lees' daughter, Dawn, become

police officers, constantly putting themselves in harm's way to preserve a certain quality of life for the rest of us? Dawn has often asked us to put her fellow officers on our prayer list. I can recall listing one of her friends, Chelsea, a fellow police officer and the mother of a four-year-old son, who was killed in the line of duty. I fail to see the selfish motive in Chelsea's service.

When Jesus tells his disciples, "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends," he is telling us that there are higher values than our own self-interest. He tells us that we should not order our life around the pleasure principle, the desire to increase pleasure and decrease pain. Sometimes pain is not only necessary; it is good. He tells us that there are higher values than materialism, the accumulation of wealth. He not only tells us; he shows us that there are higher values than safety and security. He not only tells us; he shows us that there are higher values than life itself. One of these values is love.

Some people maintain that this is what makes us special as human beings; this is what makes us higher than the animals. However, an article in National Geographic several years ago should give us pause.

After a large forest fire in Yellowstone National Park, forest rangers began their trek up a mountain to assess the inferno's damage. One ranger found a bird literally petrified in ashes, perched statuesquely on the ground at the base of a tree.

Deeply touched and somewhat sickened by the sight, the ranger gently touched the little bird with a stick. When he did so and the little bird disintegrated, three tiny chicks scurried out from under their dead mother's wings. The loving mother, keenly aware of the impending disaster, had carried her offspring to the base of the tree and had gathered them under her wings, instinctively knowing that the toxic smoke would rise. She could have flown to safety, but she refused to abandon her babies. When the blaze arrived and the heat scorched her small body, the mother remained steadfast. Because she had been willing to die, those under the cover of her wings could live.

I don't know what that mother bird was thinking and feeling as the raging inferno turned her little body to ash. I would like to think it was love. It certainly wasn't self-preservation. So maybe we aren't that different from the animals after all. Perhaps love is not just something that we human beings experience. Perhaps it is at the very foundation of the universe. Perhaps this is the greatest value.

Why did that brave police officer, who was not named in the article, rush into that potentially bobby-trapped building? He/she would probably say, "It's my job to do this."

“It’s my duty.” I think it is much more than this! I think that this police officer realized, that she/he actually experienced the deep metaphysical truth of the interconnectedness, the deep interrelatedness of all life. As I think of this officer and his/her instinctive reactions to the situation, I think of the First Responders on 09/11. How, why would you go into a building that was on fire and collapsing just because there were people inside? *I think that this police officer and the First Responders couldn’t not go into the building.*

I wonder what I would have done in the Lakeland situation. I would like to think that I would go into the building, that the cries of that wounded child would be more powerful than my desire for safety, security, comfort, and self-preservation.

What do we do with this crazy, messy world, this crazy, messy life that we are presently experiencing? I see too much darkness, too much evil, too much gross stupidity, too much self-centeredness, too much greed, too much unnecessary suffering and tragedy, too much systemic and personal racism, too much police brutality and abuse of power, too much homophobia, transphobia, Islamophobia, and anti-Semitism, too much war, too much cruelty, too much religious fundamentalism and fanaticism to be an optimist.

I also see too much caring and sharing and helping, too much reaching out, too much compassion, too much creativity, too much beauty, too much joy, too much healing, and so much love. I see so many acts of beautiful, meaningful sacrifice, the kind of love that that mother bird had for her chicks. I see how spiritual experiences, experiences of the transcendent, heal and guide people, how they give meaning to our life. I see the tremendous contributions of science, the humanities, the social sciences, the arts, and the large number of people who deeply believe in the fundamental principles of liberal democracy and human rights. I see too much of this to be a pessimist.

I guess I am what the psychologist William James, building on John Dewey and, to a certain extent, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, called a *meliorist*. Meliorism is a sort of midpoint between metaphysical optimism and metaphysical pessimism. The world is as it is. Like all aspiring bodhisattvas, I just want to accept it and embrace it and love it and then do whatever I can to make it better, to ameliorate the conditions that cause unnecessary suffering. I have the hope, the faith, and sometimes even the conviction that *together* we can do this. However, it all begins with us.

Something dark and twisted and evil happened in Lakeland, Florida last week. But something courageous, deeply caring, deeply loving, and beautiful also happened.

For what would you give your life? For whom would you give your life? For what or whom *do* you give your life? As you answer this question, you are affirming not only what or whom you would die for, but also what you are living for.

*A sermon preached by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson
The First Community Church of Southborough
www.firstcommunitychurch.com
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