

LOVE IN DEED

A sermon given at First Congregational United Church of Christ in Loveland, Colorado on April 22, 2018 (Fourth Sunday of Easter/Earth Day)

Psalm 23

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.

- 1 John 3:16-24

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The fourth Sunday of Easter is sometimes known as “Good Shepherd Sunday.” The traditional scripture readings for this day include Psalm 23 (“The Lord is my Shepherd”), and the gospel reading from John 10 in which Jesus says, “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep” (John 10:11)

I didn’t choose that text for today, but instead chose the reading from the book known as 1 John that takes up this theme – that Christ laid down his life for us – the sheep of his pasture – as a supreme demonstration of love. Jesus just didn’t say, “I love you.” Jesus loved us “in deed” – costly love in action.

And then, the author of 1 John encourages those in his community, “We ought to lay down our lives for one another.”

Many early Christians believed that quite literally. It was considered a sign of great faith and an honor to be put to death for one’s faith in Christ. One tradition says that the disciple Simon Peter was threatened with crucifixion – as Jesus had been crucified – and he responded that he was not worthy to die in the same manner Jesus did, so he was crucified upside-down. There are stories of other early believers who were arrested by the Romans during occasional periods of persecution for following this new religion, and who were killed in arenas like the Colosseum in

Rome, or others around the Roman empire, by gladiators or wild animals. We even have the written journal from the first century of a young mother, named Vibia Perpetua, who refused to disavow her faith and was put to death -- in spite of the pleadings of her father and the needs of her infant child.

Eventually, the Christian faith became accepted by the Roman Empire, and that era of martyrdom came to an end, but there are still stories of faithful believers who were willing to give their life out of love for others. We recently observed the 50th anniversary of the assassination of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who was killed because of his love for people of color and poor people that sprung from his Christian faith. In his last public speech, he seemed to know that he might be killed, when he said that he might not get to the Promised Land with his followers, but he believed they would get to that Promised Land. He was hated by many people at the time, but he truly loved Black people and white people – he believed that integration and civil rights for all were ultimately good for whites as well -- and was willing to lay down his life for them.

We also honor people who are willing to risk their lives to protect the safety of others: people serving in the military, police, firefighters, and other public servants.

Today also happens to be Earth Day – which is not really a religious holiday, but a significant day nonetheless -- one that fits with our theology. Christians have traditionally believed that God created this earth and the life that is upon it. The creation stories in the Bible suggest that the earth and its resources have been given by God for our use. The first creation story in Genesis – in an often-quoted phrase – says that God has given us “dominion” over the living things on the earth. Some have believed this means that we can use the earth and its resources for our benefit. But it more likely means that we have been appointed to be caretakers of God’s creation, ruling over it on God’s behalf.

Elsewhere in the Bible, there is a recognition that the earth needs rest and care. One of the commandments in the book of Leviticus says that fields should be allowed to rest one year in every seven – just as people should rest one day in every seven. (Leviticus 25:3-4) Every good farmer or rancher knows that the earth is not an inexhaustible resource, but a living thing that must be cared for – for our future and for our children and grandchildren.

As a nation and a world, we are constantly engaged in trying to find the right balance between using the earth’s resources for our immediate needs and benefit, and protecting them for the future. Everyone seems to have a different idea of where that balance should be.

What struck me about this reading from 1 John today is this idea that love is shown in a willingness – even to lay down one’s life for others. Most Christians in this country aren’t asked to risk their lives for their faith. We don’t usually ask new church members to attend worship,

give as they are able, serve the church, and perhaps give their lives for their fellow church members! Although, one of the meanings of Christian baptism has always been that one dies to an old life, and is raised to a new life in Christ.

Perhaps we should understand this instruction figuratively in the way we live our faith, and in the way we care for the earth. As followers of Jesus, we are commanded to love God with our entire lives, and our neighbors as ourselves. That love includes loving the earth that God has given to us, and loving the other people who live on the earth, as well as those who WILL live on it – our descendants. Can we treat the earth in a way that does not make life more difficult for other people on this earth, or for future generations?

It is a sad truth that the undesired by-products of human life and commerce on this earth often fall hardest on the poor and powerless of the world. When the Dakota Access oil pipeline was first proposed, the plan was to run it across the Missouri River near Bismarck, North Dakota. When people in that city objected, the route was moved – to the vicinity of the Standing Rock Indian Reservation. The people who must bear the risks of environmental damage are often those with the least political clout.

We are asked to love – even those who are our poor and underrepresented neighbors. To love them in deed as well as word.

Many of us tend to make political decisions and lifestyle decisions based on what is least expensive and most convenient for us. I admit that I have done this most of my life, and I still do it now – sometimes without even thinking about it. But what if we were to understand this instruction in 1 John 3 – to lay down our life for those we love – as meaning that we should not think first of our benefit and cost and convenience. We should instead consider the effects on others – especially those who have little or no voice. It seems to me those are the ones for whom Jesus would most care.

The theme of Earth Day this year is reducing plastic pollution in the world. Plastics have changed life in our modern world. They have important uses. But many plastic items are used once and then thrown away. Some get recycled, but a lot ends up in landfills – where it takes them a long time to break down. Some ends up in our oceans. It was recently reported that there is a patch of the Pacific Ocean surface that is covered with trash – twice the size of Texas. Plastic trash endangers wildlife.

I will admit that for many years I have added to that problem. When I cooked, it was convenient to put leftovers in plastic bags, which would be thrown in the trash after one use. While shopping at the grocery store I would put apples in a plastic bag, and vegetables in a plastic bag, and meat in a plastic bag. I would buy meat and fish pre-packaged in foam containers wrapped

in plastic. And at check-out, they would put all of those plastic bags into plastic bags to carry them home.

I have been trying to change that – I have been trying to “lay down my life” (change my habits) because I am trying to love the earth and the animals and people who live on it and will live on it. It isn’t easy. I have to be more conscious of what I do. I have bought and used reusable containers and bags whenever I can. I have tried to reduce the amount of waste I generate. It sometimes takes extra work. It sometimes costs more. But I am trying to love the earth and its inhabitants “in deed.”

It may not solve the waste problem for our world. It may make only a very small impact, but I hope it makes a difference if more people do the same – out of love. I know that not everyone can do this. Some people are just barely getting by from day to day, and any extra effort or cost is just not manageable. I am fortunate that I can afford to do my part. And I could probably do better.

But I encourage you – on this Earth Day – to do what you can to love the earth and its inhabitants “in deed.” Are you willing to lay down your life of convenience and miserliness out of love for God and neighbor? That is what we are asked to do as followers of the Crucified and Risen One – the Good Shepherd, who leads us in right paths.

Amen.

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