

So when we think about our Christian faith and the gospel, what exactly is the “good news” that comes to mind? I’m sure for most of us, central to that reflection would be our personal salvation. A hallmark of Christian theology since the beginning of this Jesus movement has been that through believing one secures a place in eternity, a condo in heaven as it were, where we can rest assured that death is not the end for us. And for a big chunk of our history, that’s been the main selling point we’ve used in seeking to bring others to the faith, in “saving” their souls. When you pair that with a very negative alternative, the scary image of a fiery torture for eternity for not joining the club, then you have a pretty powerful marketing technique which worked well for centuries. You make it personal and individual, and people can identify with your message because it speaks to the fear and anxiety we all have about death and the uncertainty of the afterlife. So for centuries now, much of our focus has been very much on our own personal faith, and the salvation it provides. We’ve worried about our own personal morality, and how that impacts our assurance of salvation. So we’ve developed a very personal faith, based on the salvation through grace that Paul assures us is ours for the taking.

But is that everything? Is that all there is to it?

Today’s epistle reading reminds us of the contradiction of the Christian faith that we all must come to terms with. Paul tells us we are justified by faith through grace, yet James tells us that faith without works is dead. And along comes John’s epistle that tells us God’s love abides in us only if it is manifested in truth and action. So what are we to make of all this? Well, the key according to John

is love. John's epistles talk a lot about love. That God is love, and "whoever does not love, does not know God." He goes further to say that love and action are inseparable. Love is known in action. It is through God's action that love is shown. God's action in sending Jesus Christ into the world, and Christ's action of willingly offering everything in order to ensure that we would have the opportunity for salvation. Like the good shepherd in our gospel reading, love is being willing to lay down one's life for the flock.

Does the same test apply to us?

How do others know what love is in our heart?

Our first reading this morning makes that clear. Likewise for us, it is through our actions as well. We're called to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters. Sounds pretty dramatic, doesn't it? When we hear phrases like that, our imaginations pull up images of rescue workers risking their lives to save others, or soldiers on the battlefield, risking live fire to save a fallen comrade. We think of the dramatic examples of real life and death situations when we hear those kinds of phrases, extraordinary situations of heroism. But for Christians, the concept of self-sacrifice should be one that is ordinary, not extraordinary. John indicates we ought to "lay down" our lives, which isn't necessarily a grand challenge to heroic Christians, but an every day commandment to ordinary, everyday Christians.

The Christian life is a life laid down for others, a life built on self-sacrifice. But what does that sacrifice look like in reality? Certainly it is true that in certain

times and places, it can be the real deal. The early Christian church certainly had its share of martyrs.

And in more modern times, we know that when we stand beside victims of injustice or hate or racism, we might become the next victim. If we go into situations of violence or war and share a witness for peace and healing, then we take the risk that the next bullet or bomb may have our name on it.

As an alumnus of Christian Peacemaker Teams, I know that feeling well. In every age, Christians have acted out of love, going where they did not have to go and suffering what they could easily avoid. But for the majority of us, the stakes are much lower.

We are not all called to go to war zones or to risk our lives to save others on a daily basis. Many will never encounter the opportunity to literally lay down their life for another. But the principle is the same in the course of what we would call an “ordinary” life. To “lay down our lives,” at its core, can mean any number of ways that we lay aside our claim to our own lives. We lay down our lives when we put others first. We lay down our lives when we make time for others. We lay down our lives when we put aside the human desire to live for ourselves and allow God’s love to orient us towards the needs of others.

In a world where almost half the people live on less than two dollars per day, what does it look like to take action, to put others before ourselves? In a city and county with over 11,000 people without stable housing, what does love look like? When we think of the big picture of suffering in the world, and in our larger community, it can be overwhelming. That’s why John narrows it down to singular

language, when we see a “brother or sister in need.” That implies the person in front of us, the person we encounter in our “ordinary” lives. Not that we shouldn’t work to solve the bigger picture, but we are never excused from the person in front of us. Let me share an example with you. There’s a story about a group of guys who were returning from playing golf in rural Georgia. As they drove down a two-lane road they came up on a smoldering house. It was obvious it had burned during the night. Standing in front of the smoldering ashes was a distraught woman with a small child. The men stopped the car and asked if she was okay. She said nobody was hurt but she had lost all she had. The men each pulled a few dollars out of their pockets and handed it to the woman and said, “God bless you.” They drove off in silence. After a couple of miles the driver stopped the car and took off his golf hat. He turned to his buddies and said, “Okay, take out your wallets and give me all the money you have and we’re going to go back and give it to her.” They emptied their wallets and one man even wrote a large check. The amount in the hat totaled over \$1,000. When they returned, they found the woman standing in the same place. The driver got out and said to the woman, “We just gave you some money, but we made a mistake. Would you be willing to give me all that money back?” The woman looked at him as if he was crazy, but without complaining she gave him the few dollars they had given her. The driver then added that money to that inside his hat and handed her the whole hat. Then he said, “We’ll be sending you more.” That is love action at work.

We’ve all heard the phrase of “counting the cost” of our faith. Well, this is where the rubber meets the road. When we confess to being Christian, to believing in

Jesus Christ and assenting to the truth of the gospel, do we really give thought to what all that truth entails? From the very beginning of our walk, it means a life of taking risk, of laying down our lives daily for others, in whatever form that takes. Faith and love come bound together as a single package. While it is true that faith alone is all that is required of us for our salvation, it is also true that faith is never alone, love always comes along for the ride, and that love is revealed in action. Faith and love together are the gifts from God of a single grace. We cannot receive one without the other. So you may say, "I don't know how to help the brother or sister in need in front of the QFC or outside the Starbucks. How do I know the best way to help without knowing their circumstances? I may be enabling harmful addictions or behavior." That is very true.

How do we find out a person's story? We ask them.

How do we show them love? We acknowledge their existence.

How do we solve the problems those we encounter face? That's the call to action I'm giving you.

Our gospel lesson this morning talks about how a good shepherd cares for and protects his or her sheep. How are we shepherding the lost sheep we encounter? The stray lamb in the QFC parking lot on Northgate and Roosevelt? The lost ewe in front of Value Village in Lynnwood? The confused ram outside Fred Meyer or Grocery Outlet in Lake City, or in the Albertson's parking lot in Lake Forest Park? Or the sheep that wanders into my office without a place to safely lay their head that night? What else can I do besides give them the couple of bucks I might have in my pocket, not knowing where that money will go once

they step outside the church doors. Who can we work with to find solutions to these problems? What resources can we find to ensure we are caring for our brothers and sisters in need? And finally, what can we give in our own time, effort, and goods to demonstrate God's love in us through our action. If we work together to find the answers to those questions, what better way to show who we are to our community, to show the love our faith calls us to, to show what true Christians look like.

I pray we accept the challenge. Amen.