

**Martyr's Day
John 15: 9-17
Don Lincoln**

I officiated at a church member's wedding yesterday – and used a verse from this text, which I do on occasion at weddings. “There is no greater love than this, that you lay down your life for this other one.” I always pause for a moment when I use that verse in a wedding – just in case one of them wants to say, “Wait a minute, that's not what I signed on for. Can we talk about this?”

The title of this sermon is “Martyr's Day.” Some might think that's a strange title for mother's day. Others might think, “Oh boy, here we go – celebrate the way some moms are faithful martyrs – for picking up after the kids; driving car pool; offering themselves sacrificially day in and day out.

Truth be told, not everyone had or has a mom like that. But there is a sense in which every mother lays down her life for the sake of the other. To become a mother is a tad more personal than becoming a father – a setting aside of complete control – giving up one's own for someone else.

As sophisticated as we have become medically, pregnancy and birth are still a risky proposition – perhaps less so than in any other time in history – but still – a woman lays her life on the line. While the probabilities are quite favorable – the uncertainties are also numerous.

And she opens herself to great risk because she doesn't know what that life will be like. She lays herself on the line believing another life is worth doing that for, but with the possibility that life could bring both overwhelming joy or deep, deep sadness.

In some ways, with that analysis, it seems almost crazy. But that's what martyrdom is like. Being willing to give up one's very being, for a greater purpose, a greater good. “No one has greater love than this, than to lay down one's life for one's friends.” Jesus said this on the last night of His life, at dinner with His friends. He wanted them to know why He was doing what He was doing. He wanted them to know that God loved them enough to lay down life for them. Jesus wanted them to live in that love; to live, loving life and God and family and friends; to love them enough to die for that love. AND.... perhaps to know that until you love that deeply you are not truly, fully alive.

Throughout history, people have given their lives in service to something greater. The Gospel we celebrate today was bequeathed to us by the first Christian martyrs. Countless citizens of the world have lost their lives in service to the greater good – to secure civil rights, to end wars, and stop despots from evil, to rescue someone else in danger.

But I think sometimes you and I only hear Jesus' words literally, so we cannot imagine how they actually apply to our lives. What if we don't limit our understanding of this verse to only a literal interpretation?

What else might it mean for you and me to "lay down" our precious lives? Lay down the stuff of our lives – the material or theological or vocational or familial or ecclesiastical stuff of our lives. What if you and I were willing to lay down WHATEVER gets in the way of our being an extension of God's love in the world? Willing to lay down OUR daily priorities for the sake of God's priorities in the world? Or the things God longs for and hopes for in this world. After all, justice is simply LOVE in the public square.

Truth be told, Jesus had been telling his friends all along what this looks like to lay down one's self. How to lay down your life – let go of your place, your power, your standing – to humble yourself and do the thing that would bring hope and healing and promise – even if it seems ludicrous, or risky, or dangerous, or absurd.

Love your enemy. Give up your coat. Leave the 100 and go find the one that was lost. Welcome the prodigal home; and love the uptight, jealous, older brother. Embrace the leper. Welcome the outcast. Eat with sinners. Take up a cross. Be willing to lay down your life. Remember, Jesus is saying this at supper with the one who will betray Him. And He still washes his feet and serves him this sacred meal.

It's the heart of the gospel – and where Christianity is so countercultural. It is in the giving that we receive. It is not about **getting** the love or the stuff we want; it's about giving our love and our life away. **Because you and I know that's when we actually find it.** That's what I was trying to tell that couple at the wedding. You have to find someone or something you love so much that you are willing to live for them, rearrange your world for them, sacrifice along the way for them; and yes, maybe even die – or at least die to SELF – for them!

There are countless examples of that kind of self-emptying love, but I remember one honored by President Reagan in the 80's. I've kept this story in my brain forever and this is the first time I've had the chance to tell it.

Clara Hale married shortly after high school, and moved to NYC where she worked as a domestic. She and her husband had three children, but Clara's husband died of cancer when she was only 27 years old. She took on multiple jobs to support her family. But in order to spend more time with her own children, she opened up a daycare in her home.

She took in dozens of children, and became a foster parent. Then, because of the experience she had with one baby, Clara began taking in infants born in addiction – addiction to heroin. Within months she was caring for 22 infants, loving each one through their screams and their withdrawal. She purchased a larger home to continue this ministry and devoted – lay down if you will – the rest of her life to this ministry, and in the end, Clara helped over 1,000 infants addicted to drugs. She said it was simple, really. "I just held them, rocked them and loved them."

Some of us may be called to lay down our personal ambitions in order to do what is best for our family or our new spouse. Or might be called to give sacrificially of our hard-earned resources in order to care for someone who is experiencing a crushing need that we've never had to go through ourselves. We may experience a call to give up a lucrative career in order to pursue a call to ministry or mission that serves people the rest of the world has forgotten. There are a thousand ways you and I can lay down ourselves, our lives for the sake of the Gospel.

Next week this congregation will elect a pastor nominating committee at 10:00 in the morning. We'll have a zoom meeting and they'll be space in Spellman Hall where folks can go and be a part of the meeting and will do a hybrid thing. I thought about them when I thought about this text. Laying down your life. I don't know if you know anything about what PNCs do but they'll read probably 150-200 resumes. There will be weeks where they will meet weekly. It will be a huge commitment and a significant level of confidentiality and travels to go hear somebody preach. With the expectations of about 2000 resting on their shoulders.

The amazing thing was that when the small group that was tasked to put those names together and go ask – the first 11 people who were asked said “Yes. I'm willing to set aside a portion of my life and my next year to serve.” This congregation continues to amaze me in its love and its commitment.

Jesus said, “Love one another as I have loved you” – with a living AND dying love. God's self-emptying sacrifice is God's way of loving. God's self-impoverishment is God's way of loving. God's living AND dying kind of love for the other is God's way of loving. And it's the love to which you and I are called.

May it be so. AMEN.