

Love and Laying Down One's Life

A sermon on John 10:11-18 & 1 John 3:16-24 by Nathan Nettleton, 22 April 2018

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Message

In his own demonstration of self-sacrificial love, Jesus has shown us what God is like and called us to love God and one another by loving likewise.

Sermon

Unfortunately, it is not at all uncommon to hear Christians accusing other Christians of not really being Christians. When ever a significant controversy flares up over some issue, and it almost doesn't matter what it is, the proponents of each side polarise and harden their positions, and begin believing that the "truth" as they hold it is the litmus test of true commitment to Jesus.

I was thinking about this phenomena as I considered the words we heard from the first letter of the Apostle John. This is how the Apostle sums up what God asks of us: "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."

There's not that much to it really, is there? "Believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another." Nothing about having to read the Bible in a particular way or having a particular spiritual experience or holding particular views on politics, sexual ethics, or social policy. Just two things: believe in the name of God's Son Jesus Christ and love one another.

But lest we over-simplify, let's endeavour to unpack these two things a little bit. And to start with, I want to ask the question about the relationship of these two things to what Jesus himself has said, because Jesus once commented on the two most important things too, and he didn't mention anything about believing in his own name. His second one was "love your neighbour as yourself", so that sounds pretty similar to what John says, but what about the first. John has "believe in the name of God's Son Jesus Christ" where Jesus had "love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, soul and strength."

I want to suggest to you that they are more or less the same thing, but obviously that needs some explanation or defending. Even if we were talking about the romantic kind of love, one of the most important questions is whether we are really in love with the person we think we are in love with, or are we really in love with some projection of who we imagine them to be. So too with God. When I say I love God, the real question is whether I love God as God really is, or whether I love some other image of God which is quite different from who God actually is.

So when John talks about believing in the name of Jesus, what he is getting at is who God really is. Is the name Jesus Christ the pointer to who God really is? Does the God you love with all your heart, mind, soul and strength look exactly like Jesus?

You see, it is probably not that hard to love God in theory. If God is just some distant abstract concept, we can claim to love God without any sort of consequence. But when God starts doing things, and acting in certain ways, we either love what God does, or we don't, and at that point we find out whether we really love God or not. There were lots of people in Jesus's

day who were sure that they loved God – heart, mind and soul – but who saw what Jesus did and didn't love it at all. So if Jesus is God showing us how God behaves and what God does, then our response to Jesus is where we find out what loving God is all about.

Which brings us to what we heard Jesus saying about himself in the gospel reading tonight. "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep." And he goes on to contrast that with the hired hand, who does not really care about the sheep, but is just being paid to keep an eye on them, who in the event of real danger like a wolf coming, runs off to save his own skin and leaves the sheep at the mercy of the wolf who probably has no mercy at all.

Now clearly Jesus is having something to say here about leadership styles as seen in the world around him, and I don't think he'd be putting it too differently if he was talking in our world now. When there is real danger to be faced, how often do we see our leaders putting their own lives on the line? Not often, is it?

But we don't have to look far at all to see leaders who are willing to sacrifice other lives to achieve their objectives and protect their positions. They talk of collateral damage, but they are really speaking of human lives they were willing to see lost in their endeavours to get their way. And when some mob starts baying for blood, there are always leaders willing to buy its favour by positioning themselves as the ones who are able to be toughest on the current scapegoat. I think Jesus would call it throwing a sheep over the fence to silence the wolf.

But Jesus is not only talking about leadership in the world around us. He is also challenging our concepts of what God is like. Because most of the time, we are prone to imagining that God is like those hired hand shepherds. We think of God as distant and uninvolved, not personally affected by the tragedies and conflicts that beset his sheep. And we think of God as one who would demand satisfaction in blood if his will is transgressed or his honour offended. "Sacrifice me an unblemished lamb or you will all be made to pay."

But Jesus says, "No way. God is not like that." God never demands or desires or condones the death of a single lamb, of his own flock or any other. God is the good shepherd, the true shepherd, who would lay down his own life before ever allowing the wolf to get at the sheep and who would do whatever it takes to find and rescue even one lost sheep. And true to his word, when the grinding wheels of human hostility and bitterness fire up again and demand the sacrifice of another victim, Jesus throws himself into the wheels so that his own death might fatally expose and jam up the system. "No one takes my life from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep."

This then is his commandment, that we should believe in the name of God's Son Jesus Christ, that we should see what this one does and know we are seeing God in action, and love such a God with all our heart, mind, soul and strength.

But if I left the sermon there, I wouldn't have taken this issue quite as far as the Apostle John calls us to take it. This, he says, is not just about God and about those with positions of leadership. "We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us – and we ought to lay down our lives for one another." So this image of good shepherds who lay down their lives for the sheep is not just about God and leaders; it is about all of us. All of us have responsibility for

others, to look out for their interests, to care for their needs and their safety. This is where Jesus and John use almost identical words: “love one another.”

If you were to do a careful grammatical and contextual analysis of the words here, it is technically true that it means you in the church are to love one another rather than that you are to love everyone. And some of us will baulk at that and say it sounds a bit insular and cosy and that the real task Jesus call us to is to love everyone, even our enemies. And I won't disagree with you. There is no doubt that Jesus does extend the concept of loving our neighbour to include the outsiders and even our enemies. But you know what? There is a risk of falling into that same trap again of loving an imagined distant someone, and failing to recognise the real someone in front of us.

The call to love one another begins with loving one another within the congregation because that's actually where it is hardest, precisely because it is the most real. It is not that hard for me to love some group of unknown asylum seekers in a detention centre some place else, because they never interrupt me or disagree with me or misconstrue what I say or have unreasonable expectations of me or behave in ways that get my nose out of joint. Of course, if I had to deal with them every day, they'd begin to do all those things and more, but as long as they are out there somewhere, remote and inaccessible, I can love them without any difficulty at all.

But in here, it is a whole lot more real and whole lot more difficult. Every one of us can think of some other one of us who makes loving one another an almost impossible challenge. And nearly every one of you just got thought of by some one else. And so did I. And that's actually a big part of the point of being here. We are not a natural grouping, united by similar social backgrounds, life experiences and interests. We are a motley group who fit only awkwardly together and who have only one thing in common – that we are called together in Christ to follow him in company and thereby learn to love one another.

There will be plenty of moments when the frictions and tensions in such a group as this get even more unbearable than usual, and we will be sorely tempted to engage in a little scapegoating and sacrificing, just like the hired hands. “Hmm, you know, if we just threw that one over the fence, not only might the wolf be satisfied and leave the rest of us alone, but it might be a whole lot more harmonious in here too!” Tempting at times, but if it is the good shepherd we are following, it is only temptation and never a calling. “For we know love by this, that he laid down his life for us – and we ought to lay down our lives for one another.”

You see, as easily as you can think of someone that you might be willing to toss over the fence, there is probably someone else who thought of you, and the fact is that none of us specially deserve the right to be the loved and cherished and protected ones. We are all here on exactly the same basis: he loves us and laid down his life for us and called us to follow and do the same for one another. “This then is his commandment, that we should believe in the name of God's Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us.” Simple really. Just those two things. Perfectly simple. It's putting it into practice that is not so easy.