

**April 25, 2021  
Christ the Servant, Reston  
Easter 4  
I John 3:16-24**

**Let's begin this morning with a quote by a famous Lutheran. "We have seen millions die in war, hundreds of thousands in revolutions, tens of thousands in persecutions and systematic purges of minorities. Multitudes as numerous as whole nations still wander over the face of the earth or perish when artificial walls put an end to their wanderings." It is a quote by one of the last century's most outstanding and influential thinkers, Paul Tillich, who left Germany to teach at Union Theological Seminary and Harvard as Hitler was coming to power. Tillich wrote those words in 1955 looking back over a global war and its aftermath. We still live in a world where multitudes flee death and destruction and come up against artificial walls. In Tillich's generation, death came in a world war. In our generation death comes from a virus. But then Tillich went on. He said, "In our time, as in every age, we need to see something which is stronger than death." We need to see something which is stronger than death.**

**I have a strong suspicion that is one of the main reasons you and I turn to worship on Sundays. We desire to meet something which is stronger than death. I know that is true for me. I sense that is true for you. I see it in the names and situations you submit for our prayers. Every single one of us knows and loves someone who faces loss. It may be loss of health, loss of independence, loss of a loved one. You, yourself, may be the one facing loss. So, we come together (virtually at the present) to hear about something that is stronger than loss ... stronger than death. IN that article Tillich announces that it is love that is stronger than death.**

**He was simply repeating what our author of I John said back in the days when Jesus' death and resurrection were a fresh memory ... that love is stronger than death. The words he gave us – the ones we come together in worship to**

hear – are these: “We know love by this, that Jesus Christ laid down his life for us – and we ought to lay down our lives for one another.”

In today’s gospel Jesus says, “The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.” Not in reality. Shepherds, even the very best ones, don’t actually die for their sheep. But Jesus said, “I am the good shepherd.” What he was saying was, “I lay down my life for the sheep.” He lay down his life for us. Suffered – for us. Died – for us. The body of Christ given – for you. The blood of Christ shed – for you. For me.

In Jesus’ time it was still the custom to slaughter sheep as sacrifices to God. The sacrificial lamb was a central part of temple custom. There are helpful ways to think about how the word’s “Jesus” and “sacrifice” go together and there are not-so-helpful ways. For instance, I do not believe that God the Father ordered a hit on his own son as a payment to Satan for the sin of Adam and Eve. Maybe no metaphor for the word “sacrifice” is perfect, but here’s an illustration which gets at the matter:

On May 2, 1962 Gladys Kidd placed a dramatic advertisement in the San Francisco Examiner which read, “I don’t want my husband to die in the gas chamber for a crime he did not commit. I will therefore offer my services for ten years as a cook, maid, or housekeeper to any leading attorney who will defend him and bring about his vindication.” Vincent Hallinan, one of San Francisco’s best lawyers, saw the advertisement, felt pity, and contacted the woman. He took on the case and ended up getting the innocent man released from all charges. Afterward, the attorney refused the lady’s offer of ten years of service, saying that he was satisfied to have saved an innocent man from death.”

She was offering to sacrifice her life so that her husband might live. That is the kind of sacrifice our author of First John speaks of – an example of the kind of love we should have for one another. He says, “We know love by this, that (Jesus Christ) laid down his life for us – and we ought to lay down our lives for one another.” Then he goes on to ask a key question: “How does God’s love abide in anyone who has the world’s good and sees a brother or sister in need

and he refuses to help?” That is an oxymoron to the writer of our epistle. One cannot claim to abide in God’s love and, at the same time, refuse to help a brother or sister in need.”

I am wondering what it means to *really* help a brother or sister in need in a sacrificial way. We seem to be hard-wired as a culture to watch out for ourselves first. Rugged individualism has become part of our cultural DNA. We give, but we give superficially, not sacrificially. We take that old worn sweater out of our closet, give it to Goodwill, and think that we have somehow sacrificed. We deposit our paycheck, pay our bills, go about living until the end of the month, peek at our checking account and, if there is anything left over, we give it to the church. We may even take the loose dollar bills we keep for coffee money in the car glove compartment and give it to one of those people who walk the median strips begging for money – then feel good all the way home that we have somehow done our part to address issues of poverty and homelessness.

It's like that well-worn sermon illustration (which I don't believe I have ever actually used) about the chicken and pig who were talking about what to give the new pastor. The chicken said, “Let’s prepare him a nice breakfast of ham and eggs. That would be a nice gift.” The pig said, “Yes, for you it would be a gift. For me it would be a sacrifice.”

Sacrificial giving means that you drive from the Goodwill drop off place, go to Macy’s, buy five or six brand new sweaters and drive on back to Goodwill. Sacrificial giving means that we write the check to the church first. Then, at the end of the month if we are coming up a bit short, we forego the night out at the four-star restaurant or wherever it is we might want to spend our money. If you want to give a few dollars to the person at the red light, go ahead. But, when you get home, take out your checkbook, decide what you can give to Cornerstones who works with our local homeless to put them in their own homes ... decide what you can give without it breaking your bank --- then give 20% more!!! (For the chicken it is a gift. For the pig it is a sacrifice.)

**Jesus said, “I lay down my life (for the sheep). No one takes it of my own accord.” Jesus gave sacrificially. Let’s do the same!**