

St. Lucas, May 25/26, 2019

Jesus gave a commandment, saying, "Love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends." He proceeds to also say how all he shared had its source in our Creator, and that he shared these things so we might love one another. Nothing he did over the course of his life and ministry were self-serving or for his own comfort or well-being. It was all rooted in the love of his friends and others, and done to create a community that would share and spread that love, risk everything for that love, that would bear fruit, that would continue his ministry as co-creators of God's intended world. However, this text highlights the difficulties and challenges of actually continuing his ministry, of truly being his disciples and loving as he loved. To love as he loved requires sacrifice.

Jesus spoke of 'laying down one's life,' and, as we know, this is foreshadowing his own crucifixion at the hands of an empire with the help of the religious leaders of his own people. The Love of God that he embodied was so radical that, while it was a life-giving comfort to most, it made others uncomfortable and threatened the status quo, which made him a target, and ultimately brought on his crucifixion. He knew the risks involved in loving so boldly, but nothing would keep him from sharing the unbounded, steadfast love of God he had been sent to share. These are the actions of the one we claim to follow, who sends us to share the same love of God just as boldly.

This means that discipleship of Christ isn't really all that easy or comfortable. It's not a self-help program that will always bring comfort, wealth, and happiness to us. It requires us to be uncomfortable, to sacrifice our resources, and to be un-happy at times. Just as Jesus did, it requires us to make others uncomfortable and un-happy at times, especially when it comes to addressing in word and deed the unjust and fully preventable suffering and death of our siblings whom God loves. For some, living out such a love has indeed cost them their very lives. I think of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Oscar Romero. Others, also out of love, have lost their lives or place their lives at risk now in the military, as we remember this Memorial Day. I'll leave it to the experts to speak to that more fully. For most of us, though, laying down our lives doesn't mean bodily death, but it means giving ourselves over to love so much so that our lives are not our own. It means we, in order to love as Christ loves, give our time, our energy, our money, our skills, our voices, and other resources to bear the fruit of God's transformative love in the world, and continue Christ's ministry as co-Creators of a world yet to be. It sounds lovely doesn't it, all this sacrifice and risk-taking? So why would anyone want to be on this path of costly discipleship? Aside from it simply being the right thing to do according to God incarnate, the calling from the Lord of our lives, well, there really is much to be gained, namely friends.

In 1910 there was a World Missionary Conference held in Edinburgh, Scotland. A little over 1200 missionaries were there. Only a few of them were not North American or Northern European, but among those few was a man named VS Azariah, an Indian priest of the Anglican church. Azariah had an opportunity to address the body, during which he made the plea, "Give us friends." At a time when mission was primarily focused on colonization and conversion, creating imbalanced, dependent relationships, Azariah was

calling on the church to change course. What he was saying is that they didn't need masters in the parts of the world called the 'mission field.' They needed friends. They needed people that would lay down their lives, their way of being, in order to love them as Christ loved, and enter into relationships of mutuality and care across the globe. Whether globally or locally, when we are able to live out the self-giving, self-sacrificing love of Christ, new relationships are formed, old relationships are strengthened, there is a community to work with and alongside for a common, life-giving good, a community with which to celebrate and enjoy the good moments, through which to be strengthened in the difficult moments, and through which to be supported when we need. The result is an intentional acknowledgment and living into of what Martin Luther King, Jr. described as a network of mutuality. He said, "In a real sense all life is inter-related. All life is caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be, and you can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be...This is the inter-related structure of reality." When we live out the love of God fully in this way, we stand to gain as much or more than we give as we build a community, even a world, of mutual care, of friends, and discover the deep joy that lies therein. We stand to become who we were meant to be as individuals and as God's children. We stand to be co-creators of a world of justice, righteousness, and peace. It all starts with dedicating ourselves to being true friends to one another and our neighbors, and dedicated to loving them with our whole selves, even when it is costly.

I don't remember who exactly, but someone once told me that most of the people who volunteer to join the military, past and present, do so because they want to help make the world a better, more peaceful place, and to that end, and also out of a love for their friends, they are willing to risk their lives for it. In the midst of such service rooted in sacrificial love, life-giving, sustaining friendships also form, sometimes in unexpected ways. I'd like to turn things over to my friend(s), to share a bit about this from their experiences...