

“Lesson Eight: Lay Down Your Life for Those Whom You Love”

Good Friday

Isaiah 52:13-53:12; John 18:1-19:42
(“Eighth of Nine in the Sermon Series “Life Lessons from Luke”)

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From the Pulpit

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A meditation delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Good Friday, April 19, 2019, dedicated to the memory of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, to our Wednesday Book Study Group who have been together for 20 years, to J.S. Bach and the musicians through the ages who have brought us closer to the cross and the passion of Christ and always to the glory of God!

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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Each one of us is called to follow Jesus Christ to the cross.

It is not simply a good idea. It is not even a suggestion. It is our “calling” as followers and disciples of Christ. Jesus made it clear throughout his ministry and especially through his

passion on the cross that the “must” of carrying the cross and suffering applies to his disciples no less than to himself.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes it this way:

“Just as Christ is Christ only in virtue of his suffering and rejection, so the disciple is a disciple only in so far as he shares his Lord’s suffering and rejection and crucifixion. Discipleship means adherence to the person of Jesus, and therefore submission to the law of Christ which is the law of the cross” (D. Bonhoeffer, The Cost of Discipleship, Touchstone, NY, NY, 1995, p. 87).

Here we stand this night on Calvary. Here we stand at the foot of the cross. The cross of Christ is laid on every Christian. It is not meant merely to be a jewelry item or a piece that adorns a wall or a sanctuary. The cross is meant to be laid on each of our hearts. It is to be held in the depth of each of our souls. The cross is our identifiable communion with Him. The cross is our union with his suffering and his death. He calls us to come follow him all the way to the cross and here give our lives – even unto death.

What does this mean? It means from our baptism through the end of our days, we are to lay down our lives for others. All our days, we are called by Him to come and die – die to self-centeredness and self-importance; die to privilege and presumptions of greatness; die to beliefs of being superior to another – to come and die to him - all the time knowing we all need to bend low and yield our egos and our souls to the Crucified Christ.

Coming and dying looks different for each Christian. But, coming and dying to Christ has a similar movement of the spirit. For one of us, it may mean we sacrifice all that we have for the betterment of others, for another of us it may mean we give rides to church, for another it means meals to the homeless poor, for yet another it means being a better parent, a more compassionate mentor and friend, a loving and caring teacher, doctor, nurse, attorney, soldier, activist, police officer, firefighter, childcare worker, or simply a friend to those who no one else sees or seems to care about.

Laying down your life for another means having an acute awareness of the humanity and suffering of another. Laying down your life for another takes you out of your own reality and binds you to humanity in a lasting and lifelong way.

As we lay down our lives for others, we hold the mind and heart of Christ – the one who carries the burdens of the world. As Christ bears our burdens, so we ought to bear the burdens of our sisters and brothers in this world. In bearing the burdens of others, we see not only the physical and emotional struggles of others, we also come to know their spiritual burdens and pain. As we do this, we must forgive people of all unrighteousness just as we need their forgiveness for all our unrighteousness. As we suffer with people, we change. As we suffer with people, we acknowledge deeply the brokenness in ourselves.

Here at the foot of the cross, I share this personal story tonight. It is a confession of my brokenness and sinfulness. A confession of my judgement of another person. As each of us must stand before God on this night knowing that – through his son – he given us all for the life of the world, I stand before you.

Just recently, I found myself seeing the judgment I held for someone. For years, I thought I understood her, looked at her obvious shortcomings and failings and would judge them quietly as I thought, “I am glad I am not like that.” I would look at the things that disturbed me about the person and thought myself superior. In my heart of hearts, I knew I was being terrible to this person, but my judgement did not cease. Then one day I sat still in her presence. I listened her share deeply the pain and the suffering she was experiencing. She was vulnerable with me – all the while I was judging her. I heard her story for the first time. I was ashamed at how I had judged this person. I came here, to the foot of the cross and confessed my sins to God in Christ.

It was here, at the foot of the cross that I felt the overwhelming grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. Forgiven and given new life in him, I stepped out of my judgment and stepped into compassion as I sought to understand her in a new way. For the first time, I truly saw Christ in her. I felt her suffering and struggles as a sister in Christ one who needed mercy, forgiveness and love – just like me. In her suffering, I saw his face. She was no longer a far-off person from whom I

had stood at a distance, but a sister in Christ whom I had judged for far too many years.

When I prayed, “*Father, forgive me for my sins*” God gave me a second chance. I started over again in hope of redemption and seeking God’s forgiveness and love in relation to one against whom I had sinned with my judgement.

Perhaps in your following Christ, better than I, you have not felt this way about someone you have been close to or even someone you encountered for the first time. Perhaps you have been faithful to your calling as you have followed Jesus to the cross. I hope this is so.

But, if you have struggled to love another, to lay down your life for another, I pray this night – as you pause at the foot of the cross where our crucified Savior hangs in agony before you - you will turn to him, pray to him, confess to him, and come clean to him. Seek his forgiveness, his mercy, his love and his grace. I pray that you will look upon his suffering and the suffering of others as real in ways you have never seen or felt before. I pray that you will be changed by the power of his presence – by the power of the cross.

Near the close of Johann Sebastian Bach’s St. John’s Passion, the refrain of “*ruht wohl,*” “rest well” closes out the story of Christ’s passion unto death and his being laid in the tomb.

The Chorus sings, “*Rest well, you blessed limbs, now I will no longer mourn you, rest well and bring me also to peace! The grave that is allotted to you, and encloses no further suffering, opens heaven for me and closes off*

Hell.” As we turn our thoughts and focus to the silence of the tomb, I pray that now our Savior, who has suffered so much, in his death on the cross may “rest well” in this time in his tomb.

This night, as you “rest well,” I pray that you will contemplate the cross and how you might lay down your life for those whom you love.

For our Savior, tonight, I pray that you oh tender Savior, “Rest Well. *Rest well you who have opened heaven to us and closed off Hell.*”

Rest Well.

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