“Love: Laying Down Your Life for Your Friend”
Mark 1:1-11; Philippians 2:5-11; and Mark 14:43-15:47
Part 7 of 8 in the sermon series, “The Essence of Christianity”

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From the Pulpit
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“Love: Laying Down Your Life for Your Friend”
Mark 1:1-11; Philippians 2:5-11; and Mark 14:43-15:47
(Part 7 of 8 in the sermon series, “The Essence of Christianity”)

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

Today’s Palm/Passion Story is one continuous story of disappointed expectations. From the palms being lifted, waved and laid down before the Almighty King on Sunday to the crucifixion on the Hill of Skulls on Friday, no one seems to get what they want in this week we call Holy.

In a story of disappointed expectations, someone you admire refuses to be who you think they should be.

The crowds know what they want and what they need. The people believe they NEED a hero, a triumphant
warrior king – a liberator from the Roman rulers. The poor are suffering greatly under Roman oppression. Even the well off are living a circumscribed life, allowed to succeed or flourish within the confines of a foreign culture and its values. Let’s be honest. How can you be “the chosen people of God” when you have the boot of the oppressor on your neck?

In such circumstances as this, Jesus rises up from the hills of Nazareth and enters the scene. He makes his way to the Sea of Galilee where he spends years teaching and healing among fishermen and their families. The crowds want him to fix them. They cling to him and grasp at him to make their lives better. And the “BIGGEST” better of all is for Jesus to save them from oppression - just like he saved so many from sickness unto death and ignorance unto oblivion. As he heads to Jerusalem, they expect Jesus to save them from the Romans – as he has attempted to save them from themselves. Jesus is their superman! They believe he can do it all!

But, in this story of disappointed expectations, we come to see that Jesus is not Superman. He is the Messiah. As the Messiah, he loves everyone. He does not hate anyone. He heals anyone. He does not kill anyone. He implores everyone. He impales no one. He yields tears when he weeps. He does not yield weapons as he wipes out. He prays
for God to forgive his enemies and his friends who abandon him. He does not destroy friends or enemies with putdowns or judgments. In the end, he is alone and his mission to save the world is bloody and dirty and seemingly dead as he hangs on a tree and suffers excruciating death. But Jesus of Nazareth is never to be counted out. What we see as dead, God sees as waiting for the right time to rise again. It takes the Centurion – a nonbeliever – to proclaim the absolute truth of the Gospel of Mark – “Truly this man was God’s Son!” In these words, God is not disappointed. God is glorified!

But before we reached this declaration of faith, Jesus must go through his own week of disappointed expectations. The truth we discover in Holy Week is that Jesus is alone on earth. Heaven and he are the only ones who know the agony he is facing. Even as he rides into Jerusalem surrounded by the crowds, he is alone because he knows what awaits him. Like a prisoner making his last march to the electric chair in modern times, Jesus is a dead man walking through the Golden Gate – except he is mounded on a colt. He knows this as he makes his way into Jerusalem.

This story is one in which he is betrayed by Judas, a disciple who believes him to be the Warrior King, abandoned by the other disciples in the Garden of
Gethsemane, denied by his closest friend, Peter while facing a monkey court and then in the midst of all this, scourged by Pilate in the name of “justice,” and rejected and turned on by the same crowds who loved him and worshipped him days before.

Finally and worst of all, Jesus receives the “silent treatment” from his Father in Heaven. God who appears to proclaim their relationship at his birth, his baptism and his transfiguration is silent. When Jesus needs his Father most of all – in the garden of Gethsemane and the cross of crucifixion, he hears nothing in reply to cries during this time of agony unto death. Talk about disappointed expectations! In the end Jesus is utterly and absolutely alone.

Why does he go through this? How does he go through this?

In the answer to these two questions, we discover the essence of the essence of Christianity. Jesus loves us so much that he lays down his life for us. Here is the heart of our faith. Here we meet God’s love that will not let us go.
Jesus says it before he does it. In John 15:13, Jesus says to his disciples, “There is no greater love than to lay down your life for your friends.” If you “get” this, if you do this, then you overcome all disappointed expectations. You become one with God in Christ in his agony, in his suffering and ultimately in his rising to eternal life.

**Lay down your life for your friends.** If you are not sure how to do this, listen very carefully. Mark’s passion narrative, which you are about to receive as a gift from God, tells you how Jesus laid down his life for his friends – which includes each of us. Listen and learn from our Savior what “extravagant love” looks and feels like. As our hymn text proclaims, “What wondrous love is this that caused the Lord of bliss to bear the heavy cross for my soul…”

**To God be all the glory as we step into this most holy of weeks.**

And I pray that your expectations for salvation and hope are not disappointed as our Lord of Love and Life lays down his life for you. Amen.

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