

Life-Laying Love

1 John 3:16-24
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We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. How does God’s love abide in anyone who has the world’s goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help?

Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action. And by this we will know that we are from the truth and will reassure our hearts before him whenever our hearts condemn us; for God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything. Beloved, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have boldness before God; and we receive from him whatever we ask, because we obey his commandments and do what pleases him.

And 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. All who obey his commandments abide in him, and he abides in them. And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit that he has given us. (1 John 3:16)

The third drawer in my dresser is full of tee-shirts.
Top drawer underwear, second drawer socks, third drawer, tee-shirts,
with a couple other drawers beneath those.
I implemented this organizational system many years ago,
and I think that’s why I’m so efficient.
Anyway, my tee-shirts advertise to the world things about me:
where I’ve been, who I support, from whom I’ve picked up free tee-shirts.
Yosemite National Park.
The Chili Pepper Bike Shop; Moab, Utah.
The Electric Brew.
Goshen College. Eastern Mennonite University. The Ohio State Buckeyes.
The Indianapolis Mini-Marathon. Sarah Strong 5k.
Love is a Verb – Mennonite Convention 2017.
I’ve got many others.

I don’t mind people knowing that I’m personally connected in some way
to all of these places, businesses, colleges, sports teams, and events.
After all, I’d never wear a shirt advertising something that I couldn’t support.
But the truth is, I don’t really think about what’s on my tee-shirt.
When I open my third drawer,
the ones that I choose most often
are not because of what they say on the front;
no, they’re the ones that feel the best against my body --
the ones made of the softest material,
or the ones that I’ve had for so long that they’ve become so thin
that they’ve lost even the faintest memory of their original identity
to become one with mine.

Those are my favorites.
The words on the front? They have no impact on my body at all.

Except for one, that is.
The one I'm wearing.

The latest issue of Anabaptist World
has a cover photo of Rafael Barahona
and the story behind this tee-shirt.¹

The story about Raf includes some background about him
and how he came up with the design that led to his tee-shirt project.
You should read it.

Raf's design spells out the word "Beloved",
with the names of Black men and women
who've been killed at the hands of law enforcement.

In the article, Raf says that he wanted people to remember
that the names on this shirt are of people whose lives had meaning beyond how they died;
he wanted to communicate what they and we all hold in common:
that we are beloved children of God.

Whenever I've opened my third drawer and put on this tee-shirt,
I've thought of those very things.

I've thought about what it means to wear on my living, white body
the names of black men and women whose bodies
have been killed and are now buried.

To be sure, this tee-shirt sends a message to those who see it,
but it has to *be* on my body if I want to communicate it,
it has to *involve* my body if I want to live it with any authenticity.

Its material is soft, but what's printed on my chest reminds me that what I do with my body
has to be about something more than my personal comfort.

I wear these names on *my* body.

My body, these bodies, together, beloved.

1 John 3:16: We know love by this, that Jesus laid down his life – his body -- for us.
Jesus carried on his body all of our names.

Many scholars suggest that 1 John,
the letter from which our scripture comes this morning,
was written to clear up some misunderstandings and misinterpretations of John's gospel.
Whether that's true or not, 1 John certainly echoes John's gospel.

In John, chapter 10, Jesus says,

"I am the good shepherd.

The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep."

"The hired hand sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away

[But] I am the good shepherd,

I know my own and my own know me. . . ."

And I lay down my life for the sheep."

"No one takes it from me,

but I lay it down of my own accord.

¹ Sierra Ross Richer, "More than Just Names," *Anabaptist World* (April 16, 2021);
<https://anabaptistworld.org/more-than-just-names/>.

*I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again.
I have received this command from my Father.” (John 10:11-12, 14, 15b, 18)*

That’s how we know what God’s love is, the writer of 1 John tells us,
Jesus laid down his life for us.
And so, we readers are urged to lay down our lives for each other
If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them,
how can the love of God be in that person?
Let us love not in words or speech but in truth and action.

But there’s more.
Immediately after these verses, 1 John goes on to say:
“This then is how we know that we belong in the truth,
and how we set our hearts at rest in his presence.”

It’s love, a love that follows Christ’s love for us,
a union of truth and action.
And so, if deep in our hearts, we feel broken, unworthy, ashamed,
it’s by Christ’s love, and our love that follows,
that we can feel assured before God.

There’s so much talk these days about standing up for the truth,
standing up for justice,
but if we are so concerned about living in truth
and working for justice
then we should be laying down, not standing up --
laying down our lives for each other,
just as Christ loves us.

I was talking with a friend this week.
He was reflecting on a congregation in which he had been a member
but had to leave because he moved out of the area.
He loved the church, the people, and still does,
but he said that something changed
during the last couple years that he was with them.

At some point, he said,
it seemed that the congregation cared so much about being right --
the right side of politics,
the right side of social issues,
the right side of history --,
that it was losing something that drew him there in the first place.
It wasn’t the issues themselves -- he agreed with the majority of the congregation about them.
And he had a hard time saying what was being lost exactly -- it was subtle, not dramatic,
but he described it in terms of warmth, intimacy, mercy, joy.
He didn’t say it, but I think it was a loss of love.
After all, it’s love from which all those other things flow,
love in truth, love in action.

I think, these days, we are so tempted to be warriors with words
in ways that leads us far from love.
A number of years ago, I was reflecting on this a bit.
I thought about how I was able to share my thoughts so widely on social media --

good, well-reasoned, air tight opinions, I thought --
but it left me feeling empty.

Here's what I wrote:

"What's on your mind?"
Facebook whispers like a lover,
inviting me to come to her,
to share with her
to tell her
my wisdom, sadness, and anger,
my regret, happiness, and humor.

But my love needs touch,
my words in her fingers,
revealing everything to her,
my care for her
holding her,
cherished, strange, and sheltered,
desired, known, and savored.

Over the years, we've seen The Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective,
can be used in ways that fall far short of love.
Now, don't get me wrong, in so many ways, this has served the church well.
It describes what a majority, though not all, Mennonites believed in 1995.
It's been helpful for teaching, and for introducing people to the Mennonite church.

Even if everything in this were absolutely spot on
as a summary of what the Bible teaches,
you can't love someone with it,
and trying to do so would make it wrong.

The same is true for the Bible.
Even if we could quote the exact chapter and verse
at exactly the right time for exactly the right issue,
we'd still be wrong if we mistake that for love.
You can't love someone by pointing them to words on a page.

As Rowan Williams writes,
Grace, for the Christian believer, is a transformation that depends in large part on
knowing yourself to be seen as significant, as wanted.²
The question, how are we communicating with our bodies that people are desired, beloved by God,
that they are reasons for joy?

In 2019, our congregation adopted the welcome statement that is
printed on our website and in other places.
*As followers of Jesus Christ, we are committed to living in community,
practicing peacemaking that transcends socioeconomic barriers,*

² Rowan Williams, "The Body's Grace," *ABC Religion & Ethics* (August 24, 2011);
<https://www.abc.net.au/religion/the-bodys-grace/10101214>.

acknowledges a diversity of perspectives, and welcomes all.
We celebrate the image of God manifested
in persons of every age, ethnicity, race, gender identity, sexual orientation, marital status,
education, intellectual or emotional or physical ability,
and economic or immigration status.
We strive to find common ground on which to build relationships with our neighbors near and far.
As an inclusive faith community, we affirm that all persons, including LGBTQ+ persons,
are welcome to fully participate in the life of our congregation, including membership, baptism,
*marriage, leadership, and pastoral ministry.*³

I support this statement, wholeheartedly,
and I'm glad we commit ourselves to celebrating -- not merely recognizing but celebrating --
God's image in all people and the belovedness that we hold in common.
I'm glad that all people are welcome to participate fully in the life of our congregation.
As a member but also as a pastor, I affirm all of these things and commit myself to them.
And I'm glad that one of our present Sunday school offerings can help us put these words into action.

Yet, it would be a shame if the welcome that we put out to the world,
the words that we have carefully crafted,
was a part of leading us down a road that my friend found in his former congregation.
If those words led us away from loving and caring for each other,
then what exactly are we welcoming and inviting people to join?

To lay down our lives for each other means
holding our convictions in our hands
without turning those hands into fists
to mock, to silence, or to overpower someone else.

And for those of us like me who have had years of training in educational institutions
on how to make and defend arguments,
how to expose weaknesses, how to emphasize strengths,
and how to persuade,
our words can be every bit as coercive as physical violence.

1 John teaches us to love in truth and action,
that God will abide in those who obey God's commandments,
and they will abide in God.

And if we're unclear what those commandments are?

Well, the writer spells it out for us:

"This is God's commandment
that we should believe in the name of God's Son Jesus Christ
and love one another."

If we do that, the Spirit will abide in us,
and the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace,
forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.
Against such things [?] [T]here is no law. (Galatians 5:23)

The life-laying love of Jesus living in us
is both the sign that we that we belong to the truth and

³ <https://berkeyavenue.org/about/welcome-statement>

the way that we set our hearts at rest in his presence.
It's the way that frees us
from spending our entire lives seeking power
and then, once getting it,
using it in the futile quest for comfort and security.

Immediately after I heard the verdict in Minnesota this past week,
I felt relieved,
relieved that George's Floyd's life mattered enough to hold
a police officer accountable for taking it.

But it didn't communicate what my shirt says – that George was and is beloved by God.
No, that's something that requires more.

In a blog post Cyneatha Millsaps, pastor of Prairie Street Mennonite and Executive Director of
Mennonite Women, wrote,
“The system that funneled George Floyd into a life of poverty and drug use is the same one that
shaped Derek Chauvin into an authority abusing his power—killing another human being—while
fellow officers stood by. Why do we evade responsibility for this calamity? It is our system,
too.”⁴

What does it mean that I wear George Floyd's name on *my* body?
What does it mean to lay down our lives for each other?

Sometimes, I think, we let our minds run wild with hypotheticals,
ones that might require us to sacrifice our lives completely
at some point in the future.

I've thought about what I would do if I saw in Goshen
what that horrific video showed in Minneapolis.
I don't know, to be honest, but I do know what I hope I'd do –
I hope I'd put my body on the line.

But those hypotheticals invite us to think of ourselves as saviors
while we go about our daily lives as we always have.

Yet, the life-laying love of Christ is not about hypotheticals
that could happen at some time in the future.

No, it's learning to love in this way in the present,
and then, if we encounter what we imagine hypothetically,
we will be equipped to respond.

I think it means bearing each other's burdens, sharing each others' pain,
weeping with those who weep, rejoicing with those who rejoice.

I think it means being content with enough and not hoarding our time, our talents, or our possessions.

I think it means learning the truth about ourselves,
being willing to learn from people whose bodies give them a very different perspective
on life in this country and in this world.

I think it means learning to trust the name of Jesus and loving one another.
understanding that we wear each other's names on our bodies.

⁴ Cyneatha Millsaps, “Ponder: Lamenting ‘Guilty’,” *Mennonite Women USA* (April 21, 2021);
<https://mennonitewomenusa.org/2021/04/ponder-lamenting-guilty>.

I think it means learning to love ourselves as reason's for God's joy,
and, in the name of Jesus, helping others know that, too.

We wear the names on this tee-shirt on *our* bodies.

We wear the names of our neighbors on our bodies.

And we begin to love them by sharing our love with the people we encounter --

in our church, in our community, at the cash register, on the road, and in the shadows.

Day by day by day.

We know love by this, that Jesus laid down his life for us

—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another.

Our body, these bodies, together,

beloved.