

LAYING DOWN YOUR LIFE, AND OTHER DIFFICULTIES

Sermon for Easter 4B: 1Jn 3:16-24, Jn 10:11-18

LPC, 5/3/09

I caught the end of a good movie the other night: *Glory*, which tell the true story of the Massachusetts 54th regiment in the Civil War, one of the first regiments of black soldiers. If there is a movie that better depicts valor in battle, I've not seen it.

Those men really laid down their lives for the Union. But as the movie shows, as the first black regiment, they laid down their lives for more: for freedom for black people, and, to use baptismal language, for the dignity of every human being.

Today the Bible tells us, "LAY DOWN YOUR LIFE!" Or at least, the first letter of John tells us that "we ought to lay down our lives for one another." Now there are certain professions like soldiers and police and firefighters who, in the course of their work, have a higher probability of having to lay down their lives than the rest of us. But the biblical admonition is not confined to people with high risk jobs. We are all told to lay down our lives for one another. I would certainly find it helpful to unpack this concept of "laying down your life."

Fortunately, besides John's letter today, we also have John's gospel, which gives us an example of what it is for a person to lay down his life. That example, of course, is Jesus. Jesus describes himself as "the good shepherd [who] lays down his life for the sheep," as opposed to the "hired hand," who runs away in the face of danger, leaving the poor sheep to fend for themselves.

From Jesus' shepherd metaphor, we know something of what it is to lay down your life. To lay down your life is to be a good shepherd. A good shepherd has a relationship with his sheep. He cares for them and is there for them. To lay down your life for others is to be in relationship with others – to care for them and be there for them.

The natural assumption, especially when using Jesus as our example and model, is that laying down your life for others means necessarily to die for them. This is truly an intimidating prospect. But the example of Jesus as the good shepherd adds another dimension. If to lay down your life for others is to be in relationship with them, caring for them and being there for them, then the expectation is not so much about dying as about living. The meaning of laying down our life for each other is not about dying, but about living in relationship. In some ways this is harder.

Relationships can be risky. Sometimes certain relationships cost us more than we can bear. Most of us consciously or unconsciously limit our relationships, either in the number of relationships we maintain, or in the depth of our relationships. We may want to love as God loves us, but the fact of the matter is that unless we protect ourselves, we'll be walked over, taken advantage of. For appropriate self-love, if for no other reason, it is sometimes necessary to maintain some boundaries.

This is definitely necessary in my business, professional ministry. People call on the telephone with significant needs. It is good that the church is known as a place that helps people and that priests are known as persons of compassion. But there are plenty of people who will take advantage of churches and of priests, and I have learned to be circumspect in responding to needs.

In one situation while serving at another church, I refused to give a man the \$50 he said he needed for a train ticket. His story had followed a pattern I've come to recognize as a probable fraud. I offered him a \$10 gift card at a grocery store in case he was genuinely hungry but he waved it off. He was angry. "You call yourself a Christian," he yelled.

I *do* call myself a Christian, although often I'm a very bad one. I *do* sometimes ask myself, "What would Jesus do?" What *did* Jesus do?

I think it's interesting, for one thing, that Jesus is never reported to have given anyone money, except to pay his taxes. But here's the important thing: Jesus did not allow himself to be taken advantage of. Laying down your life for others does not mean being their doormat.

Jesus is quite explicit that his decision to lay down his life is freely chosen and intentional. His life is his own to lay down or take up. He submits to the Father and to no one else, not even to Pilate, the representative of the all-powerful Roman empire.

In our passage today Jesus says, "I lay down my life to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again."

Laying down your life, after Jesus' example, is a powerful action freely taken. It is not a submission to the egos of others. It is not a relinquishing of freedom. Life is something to be laid down or picked up. It is never to be given to others to walk on.

In this light the moral question for those of us who would follow Jesus by laying down our lives shifts. The question is not, "What **must** we do for each other?" but, "What **are we free** to do for each other?" Thinking of Christian discipleship as something we are free to lay down or take up opens all kinds of possibilities. Christian morality is not about shoulds, but about love, and freedom.

What are you free to do for another today? Offer an encouraging word? Reach out in love? Forgive a past hurt? Feed someone? Where is your joy leading you?