

What Love Looks Like - A Sermon for the Fourth Sunday of Easter  
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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 3:16-24*

What does love look like? According to the author of our Epistle from First John, it looks like believing in the name of Jesus and loving one another. But there's more to it than that, and if we read the fine print, we are given a few more details. More specifically, love looks like laying down our lives for others in the way Jesus did. It looks like sharing our abundance with those who are in need. It looks like not only saying words of love but doing acts of love. It looks like obeying the commandments and doing what pleases God.

To lay down our lives for one another as Jesus the Good Shepherd has done, is the most complete and perfect example. Those in the armed forces who serve our country live in perpetual readiness to lay down their lives for us. Others lay down lives in literal ways such as saving people from burning buildings, or rescuing someone who is drowning. These are heroic acts where they may lose their own lives in the process.

The opportunities for us to lay down our lives do not always require us to die, and we don't have to go far to find them. People everywhere are searching for hope, for help, for God's love. They are the family and friends we see every day. They are the people of this parish and of this town. They are the strangers who pass through our lives. They are the collective millions in our country and in the world suffering with poverty, hunger, homelessness, or lack of education.

In any moment there is an opportunity for us to lay down our lives. Maybe it's allowing the driver in the next lane to merge in front of us, even if they were ignoring the "lane ends" sign. It might be letting go of unkind words said by someone in the heat of the moment, or listening to the cashier in the checkout lane after we ask how her day is going. Perhaps it looks like calling to check on parishioners we have not seen, or finding ways to volunteer at church or in the community.

We are called to be Good Shepherds in all the ways Jesus has shown us. In our obedience to do this, we will share the love of God; make it visible. We will, like Jesus, draw all people to God, sheep who do not yet belong to the fold. We do this by simple acts of love, kindness, and compassion.

I have a friend who receives weekly infusions for a medical condition. Spending time in a room with others who are receiving infusions, and with the nurses and technicians who are helping to heal them, there is time to fill. The introverts bring books or scroll their phones, but their ears are open.

My friend has become friends with the nurse who prepares her infusions and their conversations have turned to matters of faith, although it took months of conversation for this to happen. What has become clear to all of us, through the stories she shares, is that the infusion room becomes church for the people who are present.

Those who have been there awhile, begin to share the things that are weighing down their hearts, they pray for one another, out loud! They laugh together about their joys and blessings, and they weep for each other's losses. Those who are newer to this unexpected church service watch and listen until they decide if they will participate. The miracle is that almost all of them do! They are invited into God's presence by these gentle exchanges of love and concern. This is what love looks like.

So often we think love is about emotions, feelings, and sweet words. Love does begin there. Who doesn't appreciate being told they are loved? At some point, however, love, if it is to be real, must become tangible, revealed not only by words and feelings but by actions. "Little children," John writes in his first letter, "let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action."

God's love for humanity became tangible in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. God enacted love to show us what love looks like. And there are people who are depending on, waiting for, our actions of love.

In our gospel reading, Jesus the Good Shepherd says to us, four times, that he lays down his life for the sheep. Four times he describes the pattern for our lives. And in his letter, John reminds us of this pattern when he says, "He laid down his life for us and we ought to lay down our lives for one another."

Whenever we lay down our life for another we proclaim that resurrection is not only an event in the past but a present reality, making resurrection tangible. Every time we lay down our life in love for another we remember Jesus' death and proclaim his resurrection even as we await the day of his coming.

Knowing what love looks like and choosing to lay down our lives as we follow Jesus means we will have to pay attention to where the Spirit wants to lead us; we will have to listen to what the Spirit wants to tell us. My experience is that this takes some practice, it takes some letting go of my own preferences and determinations, it takes a willingness to become vulnerable and open to the work of the Spirit and a belief and trust in the name of Jesus.

I want to invite you to practice this with me. Each morning when we wake up, let's proclaim our belief, our trust in Jesus. And then let's ask for the opportunity to show love to someone who needs to see it, to hear it, to experience it. What does love look like? Jesus will show us. Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action. Amen.