

“Laying Down One’s Life for a Friend”

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The Gospel writer of John captures these words of Jesus, who is focusing us on love. He says to us, *“As God has loved me, I have loved you; abide in my love.”*

Abide isn’t a term that we use very often. It’s not a term that I recall using last week. I don’t recall if I have ever used it in my marriage. It’s not a word we poll with love very often. It means “to remain, to stay in, to last in.” So, Jesus is calling us to abide in his love – remain. And, how do we do that? Jesus goes on to say, *“If you keep my commandments, you’ll abide in my love.”* So the way we stay within this love that Jesus has given us, is to keep his commandments.

Well, what are these commandments? The writer is slowly laying out what it is that Jesus is asking of us. Jesus says, *“Love one another as I have loved you.”* This is, of course, a variation on his summation of all of the law of the prophets, when he said, *“Love the Lord your God with all of your heart, soul, mind and strength. And, love your neighbor as yourself.”* Here he is asking them to love one another, as Jesus has loved us. Then he goes on to answer the question: “What does that mean?” He says, *“Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one’s life for one’s friend.”* That is clearly what Jesus is doing for his friends who he is speaking to, and that is what Jesus has done for us.

But, this passage doesn’t go on to unpack that. What does it mean “to lay down our lives for our friends”? For Jesus, it was a description of his whole life, his whole ministry. His coming to earth was an act of self-sacrifice; taking on all of the fragility and difficulty, and struggle that we face. We don’t often have opportunities to lay down our lives, but today as we gather in memorial, in honoring those who have served and those who have passed away in service to our country, we have examples of those who have laid down their lives; we have examples of those who have expressed a kind of service and love that risks their life, and for some has cost their life.

The Apostle Paul admonished one of the churches he was writing to: *“Imitate my faith, and those whom you have learned from...”* It is a way that we can see Christ. As Paul was imitating Christ, we could imitate Paul; as those who are laying down their lives, who are risking their lives are mirroring Christ’s love, we can look to them as role models in our faith and consider what does it mean for us? How can we be like Christ, by considering those who love sacrificially?

This last week we had the opportunity to learn, on the news, of the mayor of Ogden, Utah: Brent Taylor. Brent Taylor was the husband to Jennie, and the father to seven children. He was elected to the city council of North Ogden in 2009 and, in 2013, he was elected their mayor. He was a PhD-candidate studying international relations.

He served 12 years as an officer in the Army National Guard. Seven of those years on active duty, including two tours in the Iraq War, one tour in Afghanistan and then, in Afghanistan, he was a combat advisor to the Afghan Border Police.

This last year he was activated again and he was serving in an exercise, when he was killed on Saturday November 3, while serving to prepare their military, by an insider attack.

The temporary mayor (who stepped up while he [Taylor] was deployed) spoke of his grief and shock; this loss of this one, who had been putting himself willingly in harm's way for many years. One of the Afghan soldiers that he [Taylor] worked with wrote a letter to his [Taylor's] widow. She said: "Never stop telling your children what a great man he was."

Brent Taylor, last year, shared with his community - and now with the world - some words on his Veterans Day Address: He said, "The sacrifices of you, and so many of your comrades, have made it possible for America to be a source of light, scientific growth, and human progress throughout its entire history. I thank you and I pray always that God will bless America." Brent Taylor was giving us an opportunity to see one individual's story of the self-sacrifice and self-risk of our military, as we consider on this Veterans Day.

This is self-sacrificial love. It is a love that risks something - that costs something. It is an expression of Jesus' love modeled for us. I feel for his [Taylor's] community, for his family, for his widow and children.

Now, I did not grow up in the military - some here did. Scott grew up in the military. My wife grew up in the military and, when I was talking to her throughout our marriage and this week about Veterans Day, she described about being on the base and having families deployed, and she said, "You know, there was a lot of fanfare when people were deployed, and when they came home; but there was also this quiet struggle - the sometimes forgotten struggle - of the long time apart from one another, as those deployed went off to be deployed, and those at home stayed apart from them.

I was reminded of this in our own congregation. I'm not going to share the family, I haven't asked them for that; but I saw the opportunity to see the sacrificial love and service that they were doing. I met one of the members of our congregation a couple of years ago sitting in Westminster Hall eating dinner, and he was here serving - or here serving in his civilian life - when that he described to me that he was a reservist, and was going to be activated for a year to Afghanistan. He is now serving there and his children and wife are here, and they participate in our youth program. His wife shared with the staff - several of us - that, "Thanksgiving, for us, is being supportive in the lives of our children, while their father is deployed." And we, as a congregation, we as a community, seek to come around this family. We recognize in the midst of this, this sacrifice that they have made on our behalf, this time away from one another; time when children are growing and forming, when a father might wish that he could be here, but is also serving and is giving sacrificially.

This is sacrificial love. It is a love that risks something, a love that costs something, and it is an expression of Jesus' love modeled by the veterans honored today.

This last couple of years, I have had two opportunities to stand in Arlington National Cemetery. I was standing, this last spring, in front of the John F. Kennedy Memorial, where I went with my children to visit the graves and share with them this monument of the giving of our nation. I took the picture that is on the bulletin today. Not the one of JFK (that was a little before I was born). [Laughter.] The one [picture] below it.

As I stood looking at the tombstones [visually] going off in the distance, where 400,000 of our veterans have been interred - a symbol of the more than 1 million American men and women who have died in war - I was struck by these words of John F. Kennedy that he shared in his inaugural address. He said, "Let every nation know, whether it wishes us well or ill, that we shall pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe, in order to assure the survival and the success of liberty."

The words of JFK, as he stood as Commander and Chief, in front of a great nation, would ring hollow were it not for the testament of Arlington National Cemetery - for the million and more who have given their lives in service.

We are separated today in a way that generations before were not. I did not grow up knowing many people in the military. In World War II, one in eight people was involved in the war effort - about 12 percent of our population. Right now, about one percent, or one in one hundred serve in the military, so we stand farther away from those. We have fewer opportunities, but as we look today, as we consider those who have put themselves in harm's way, these who have brought their lives and stood in the gap, for our nation at the will of the Commander - these are the ones who have made it possible for a Commander and Chief to say these words with authority, with integrity.

This is a model. It is one of the many ways that people have given their lives in service to Jesus Christ, in love for one another. Let us revere one another, and remember and honor those who have served this way. And, let us learn, let us consider and be inspired to a faith that calls us to love and self-sacrifice. Amen.