

*Dare to Be Sheep*  
**Rev. James Van Schaick**  
**Pound Ridge Community Church**  
**Fourth Sunday of Easter**  
**April 22, 2018**  
**1 John 3:16-24**  
**John 10:11-18**

“This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us.” (1 John 3:16) This is what John the Evangelist tells us in the epistle from 1 John that you heard today. Jesus agreed. On the last night of his life, Jesus would say to his disciples, “Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends.” (John 15:13)

The Apostle Paul would later write essentially the same thing, but with some elaboration. In words that you often hear as part of our Communion service, Paul said that the proof of God’s love for us is that Christ died for us while we were still sinners – when we had done nothing to earn such love, and arguably, weren’t really worth the sacrifice. I hope you all believe this. It is the simple definition of “grace,” the unmerited gift from God. It is one of the cornerstones of our United Methodist theology and doctrine.

John goes on to put forth a very simple but profound challenge for us in his epistle today: “... we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers [and sisters]. (1 John 3:16) John’s words here suggest an unspoken question that lurks in the background through our Lent and Holy Week experience as we ponder the enormity of Christ’s sacrifice for us. Could we have done what he did? Would we? And it has a corollary: just what are we willing to give up our lives for?

Of course, as a practical matter in the society we live in, it is unlikely that most of us will ever face the opportunity or the need to literally lay down our lives for anything. But in many parts of the world, John’s challenge is far more than academic. We no longer see horrific videos of the mass killing of Christians since the (at least, temporary) defeat of the radical Islamist State in Iraq and Syria. Yet an organization called Open Doors USA reported that in the 50 countries that they monitor, over 3,000 Christians were murdered for their faith last year.<sup>i</sup> Just because they professed faith in Christ. Hundreds of thousands more have figuratively given up their lives in repressive regimes. Heading the list is North Korea, where it is estimated that 50,000 Christians are held in prison and labor camps as “enemies of the state.”<sup>ii</sup>

We could speculate that the victims of all kinds of anti-Christian violence the world over might have saved themselves by the simple expedient of renouncing their allegiance to Christ. But they didn’t. This, in turn, raises another difficult question

for us to ponder here in the relative safety of our nation. How would we respond, faced with similar circumstances?

But if you were listening carefully to the reading from 1 John, you heard that John is speaking about giving up our lives in a much broader sense. John immediately takes his challenge to us out of the realm of martyrdom and grounds it firmly in the ordinary – in the lives we live every day. Listen again: “And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers [and sisters]. If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother [or sister] in need but has no pity on [them], how can the love of God be in him? Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth.” (1 John 3:16-18)

The love of God that we have received isn't just something to talk about – it's something that by our every decision and action we either hoard for ourselves or share with others. Laying down our lives in this sense means putting our agendas aside and imitating the self-emptying sacrifice of Christ in how we care for all our sisters and brothers – especially the poor and the powerless. Jesus showed us what God's love is like and told us to love each other the same way. John isn't asking us if we're prepared to die in Jesus' name. He wants us to do something even harder. John is asking us if we're prepared to truly live in Jesus' name.

This challenging and anxiety-producing passage from the epistle of 1 John is paired today with two other scriptures with a completely different feel. One is the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm. The second is from John's gospel. It is Jesus' discourse where he identifies himself as the “Good Shepherd.” These are two of the most comforting pieces of scripture imaginable. They assure us that the good shepherd is there to love us, to protect us, and to show us the way to fulfilling lives. Jesus says, “My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father's hand. (John 10:27-29)

The challenging reading from 1 John, and the feel-good assurance of the “Good Shepherd” reading from the gospel seem to be sort of oddly paired today. What I mean is that 1 John is laying out a bold and difficult calling for us as Christians. It is to put our ourselves second in service to others – to sacrifice for others as Christ did. The gospel lesson about the “Good Shepherd” doesn't seem to be issuing any kind of challenge to us at all. It doesn't really ask us to do anything, apparently.

But I'm thinking that maybe it does. Let's look again, starting with identifying the roles in the gospel lesson. Jesus is the shepherd. And that makes us the sheep. And it may seem like the sheep have nothing more important to do than eat, and sleep, and follow the shepherd around basking in his love and care. But maybe being sheep demands more of us than that.

Let's explore this image of "us as the sheep" a little more. Remember that Jesus is speaking in a time when the very survival of whole populations depended on sheep. Sheep were critically important, and that made shepherds critically important, too. Sheep need to be protected and provided for if they are to thrive. It's obvious why the sheep need to thrive. The shepherd doesn't raise sheep because they're cute and soft and make nice pets. The sheep have a mission. And it's a very simple one. They are there to become either warm clothing, or food. The well-being of others depends on their doing that. And the sheep are no good to anyone until they do.

You see, put this way, the point is not so very different from the message of 1 John. God, the owner of the sheep, and Jesus, the good shepherd, provide endless care and protection for the flock. The good shepherd is ready to lay down his own life for the sheep. These things are gifts to the sheep, given without conditions. But God hopes his love and generosity will lead to something important – that out of the things that have been given, there will be a giving to others. The survival of God's children literally depends on it. Isn't this what John's letter was saying this morning? Doesn't this sound strangely like God's plan for the health and well-being of all of God's creation? God gives. We give back for God's purposes. God loves. We love others in God's name.

Some of you are probably thinking, "Pastor, I was with you on the whole 'sheep as a metaphor for us' thing. I was with you on the idea of the sheep having a mission. I was with you right up to the part where the sheep's job is to become, well... lamb chops." I understand your problem. But as I said earlier, John's letter about giving our lives for others, and this sheep metaphor I'm proposing are not primarily about our being willing to face death. Rather, they are both about our engaging a simple question. What level of commitment am I ready to accept? How committed am I prepared to be?

The comparison between us and the sheep is not exact because the sheep can't choose the way in which they are going to contribute when the time comes. If they could choose, every spring on the farm would see a huge line of sheep waiting to be sheared, while very few sheep would be venturing near the barn with the big sign over the side door that says, "Get your fresh lamb here."

But God does leave it to us to choose the role we will play in God's work on earth. God lets us choose the personal cost we're willing to pay. That means we're free to do nothing. We can be minimally involved: we can just offer up a little wool from time to time. It doesn't hurt, and it will grow back. Or we can go all in and pursue a depth of commitment to others that means putting our own lives to the side. That's the choice we face as Christians, every day. That's the whole point.

"This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us." (1 John 3:16) "And this is his command: to believe in the name of ... Jesus Christ, and to love one another as he commanded us." (1 John 3:23) You know, it really doesn't

take much to convince most people that someone else giving up their life for another is the supreme act of love. But convincing me to give up my life, even a little – that’s a tougher sell. Isn’t it?

On this Sunday when our readings remind us that Jesus is the Shepherd, John does something else as well. He invites us to dare to be the sheep. Because we can talk about the love the Shepherd gives us all we want. But it isn’t really love until we transform it into action.

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<sup>i</sup> <https://www.romereports.com/en/2018/01/18/persecution-of-christians-intensifies-in-2017-3066-were-killed/>

<sup>ii</sup> <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2018/january/top-50-christian-persecution-open-doors-world-watch-list.html>