

Laying Down Our Lives

The Rev. Dr. Peter
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1 John 3:16-18

**Sermon Series: The
Kingdom of God**

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I invite you to respond with the first thing that comes into your mind. Don't belabor the point; give me your immediate reaction. Your boss announces your job is being eliminated, but there is a silver lining. There are two other positions in the company available: one involves a promotion, the other represents a demotion. Which job interests you more? (Congregation: the promotion.)

You take the promotion. This promotion requires you to relocate offices. There are two offices available to you. One office is 20 percent larger than the other. Do you want the larger or smaller office? (Congregation: larger office.)

Your new promotion gives you a managerial role within the company. It also gives you access to lunch in the executive dining room. Do you want lunch in the executive dining room or the employee's cafeteria? (Congregation: the executive dining room.)

As a manager, you have a choice of flying business class or coach. So, what will it be, business class or coach? (Congregation: business class.)

Some of you aren't participating anymore. You think I'm setting you up for something, don't you? If truth be told, I am setting you up for something. There is

within us an instinctive, insatiable desire to climb the ladder. We would rather take a seat of honor than assume a lesser role.

Scripture warns us about the inherent dangers of prosperity. Maybe that's because prosperity atrophies the soul more than adversity. Power and wealth become addictive. We don't need people quite as much when we are prosperous. We don't need that wife or husband who helped us get there. We don't have as much time for our kids anymore. Pretty soon, we don't need God. Jesus warned us against the dangers of gaining the whole world, for by so doing we can lose our very souls (Mark 8:36).

We've been talking for several months about the kingdom of God. During Lent, we are exploring what it means to live as kingdom people. We have discussed not passing judgment on disputable matters, speaking the truth in love, practicing forgiveness and confronting wrongdoers. Today, we turn our attention to the Biblical admonition to lay down our lives for one another.

In our Scripture lesson, John contrasts taking life with giving life. Cain takes the life of his brother Abel. You can read about it in the passage which precedes our lesson, verses 12-15. Indeed, to rob someone of life is the greatest evil we can perpetrate against someone else.

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***Love sacrifices
self for the
good of others.***

Cain takes life; Jesus Christ lays down life. The phrase, “lay down” means to set aside or divest ourselves of something, as we would a garment. Jesus’ sacrificial gift is accomplished at unimaginable cost to the giver. What more could Jesus give than his life?

Hatred and love both demand sacrifices. Hatred sacrifices others for the sake of the self. Love sacrifices self for the good of others.

Cain takes life; Jesus Christ gives life. If Cain is the epitome of hatred, then Christ is the prototype of love.

Jesus Christ lays down his life on the cross for two reasons, to atone for our sins and to serve as our example. Jesus said, “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays his life down for his sheep” (John 1:11, 15, 17-18).

There is a part of me that longs for a muscle Messiah. I want a Rambo, Ninja-styled Jesus who will mow down evil and reward the good.

God’s power in Jesus Christ is an upside-down, counter-intuitive kind of love. Jesus is not the Messiah of muscle power. There are no pyrotechnic displays of omnipotence.

You see, power can force people’s obedience, but it cannot compel love. Only love is capable of evoking love in return. Jesus invoked an altogether different kind of power. He refused to use coercive power. Jesus is not a Nazi. Love has its own kind of power.

Who could have ever conceived of the cross before it happened? Walter Wink has said, “If Jesus had never lived, we could not have invented him.” C. S. Lewis acknowledged that one of the reasons he believed Christianity is that it’s a religion you never could have guessed.

Verse 16 implores us, in the same manner and spirit of Jesus, to lay our lives down for one another. “Jesus Christ laid down his life for us—and so we ought to lay down our lives for one another.”

Few of us will be called on to lay down our lives in a single act of heroism. Most of us will be called on to give ourselves away, a little at a time.

It is worth noting in 1st John, as well as the whole witness of Scripture, that we are constantly reminded to love people, but never once are we commanded to like people. Loving and liking are not different degrees of the same thing. They are essentially different.

Liking someone is a natural, instinctive response to someone. Liking someone doesn’t take effort. Either you like someone or you don’t. We find ourselves naturally drawn to some people and put off by other people.

Loving people is entirely different. Love sees beyond what it does not like. In fact, it is even possible to love people we don’t particularly like. We can love people we don’t like by promoting their welfare and seeking their well-being.. This kind of love doesn’t come naturally; it comes from outside of us. It comes from God.

Loving everybody in general may be an excuse for loving nobody in particular.

To lay down our lives for people doesn't mean we become their doormats. Most of you have doormats—those rectangle-shaped, heavy-duty mats placed at the entrance to your home for people to wipe their shoes on before entering. Laying down our lives doesn't mean we allow people to walk all over us. Make yourself a doormat and people will walk all over you.

Rather, John supplies a specific example in verse 17 of what it means to lay down our lives. Laying down our lives means sharing our prosperity with the poor. How can we justify being friendly to the poor, yet ignore their material needs? That is why John writes in verse 18, "Let us not love in word and speech, but in truth and action." Love is putting our money where our heart is.

It's easier to love humanity with a capital H than it is to love individual people. Loving everybody in general may be an excuse for loving nobody in particular. Take forgiveness as an example. C. S. Lewis said, "Everybody says forgiveness is a lovely idea until they have something to forgive."

John's epistle doesn't merely talk about love in the abstract. Love results in practical acts of kindness. So what might it look like in real terms to lay our lives down for one another?

What might it look like to lay down your life for your spouse? The Apostle Paul receives considerable flak for advising wives in Ephesians to submit to their husbands. Yet, later in the same pass-

age he directs husbands to love their wives in the same way Christ loved the church. How did Christ love the church—by laying down his life! I see no substantial difference between wives who submit to their husbands and husbands who love their wives as Christ loved the church.

God created marriage for reasons of partnership and companionship (Genesis 2:18). God also created marriage to wean us away from selfishness. I cannot be happily married and remain selfish. I've tried it and it doesn't work! Loving my wife the way Christ loved the church calls me to move beyond myself.

What might it look like to lay down your lives for your children? I officiated at a wedding last weekend at which several very pregnant women were in attendance. I had officiated at the weddings of these women and their husbands several years previous. I found myself admiring these women. They had voluntarily accepted a demotion to carry their babies. They went willingly from being smaller to being larger. They took a comfort and fashion demotion. When their babies arrive, these parents will take a sleep demotion. It won't be long before these parents will put aside their self-serving ambitions by shuttling their kids to soccer games and dance recitals. Then college comes along and you sign up for poverty when your kids do that. Being a parent involves sacrifice. Such is the way of love.

Jesus said to his disciples, "No one has greater love than this, to lay

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down one's life for his friends" (John 15:13). What would it look like to lay your lives down for your friends?

David and Jonathan formed a great friendship in the Bible. Even though Jonathan was the son of King Saul and the rightful heir to the throne of Israel, he willingly gave up everything for his friend David. Jonathan recognized David as the Lord's anointed and was therefore willing to accept a demotion for the sake of his friend.

Bill Hybels serves as pastor of Willow Creek, a 20,000 member church in suburban Chicago. Bill is also a prolific author. His publisher came to him a few years back and asked him to write another book. His publisher gave him the green light to write on anything he wanted. Bill was studying Philippians 2 at the time, a passage that focuses on Christ's demotion. "Even though Christ was in the form of God, he did not count equality with God as something to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave... He humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death, even death on the cross" (2:6-8).

Hybels told his publisher that he wanted to write a book on downward mobility. His publisher warned him that he was making a big mistake. No one will pay money to buy a book on how to become demoted.

You know something? His publisher was right. Of all the books Hybels has written, *Descending into Greatness* has sold the least.

We don't want a demotion. We want to ascend into greatness.

Love takes a demotion. Love involves sacrifice. Take a step down. Lay down your life!

