

Living Love

The Rev. Geoff Parker to First Parish Church - Brunswick, ME

Sunday, April 26, 2015

Scripture: [1 John 3:16–24](#)

Introduction to the Scripture

We've been asking the question of what it means to be post-Easter people the last few weeks. Last week, we began looking at this scripture, the First Letter of John. We began by recognizing what had happened in the life of this "Community of John" just as they began to write: a final and shocking theological split from the Jewish Community, including Jewish Christ followers that left them isolated.

Isolation is the root fear and experience of shame, one of our gut human reactions, the fear whether justified or not, that we will be isolated and cast out from the places we most deeply desire connection.

Last week we took apart how some of the John community's language of "sin" or "lawlessness": the bits that can sound the most condemning and frightening to us are actually much more connected to the importance of community to this group of people, and to us. I talked a bit about how much these frightening realities of isolation and shaming are present for us in an increasingly interconnected, but also anonymous world.

Of course, the community of John besides its own fear of disconnection, lifted up the great hope of how Christ had come to connect them, one to the other. Christ's unashamed love becomes the great hinge on which the John community begins its story anew. Hear what love they found, and what love they sought to be a part of. You will hear a very familiar phrase that I want you to hold with some suspicion to start... about how we give of our lives...

Sermon ^[1]

Someone got me on the way out the door last week, so if anyone asks about the preaching at First Parish, you can just say, "They take requests!" This person rightly pointed out that last week I talked about two experiences of shame and shaming that often take place: those that have done wrong in some way and experience shaming, and others who have actually done something quite heroic, and receive the same treatment. Yet there's a wide swath of humanity left out by this conversation so far... those who have done nothing at all,

This week, I want to spend some more time with the "what then?" In the face of so much disconnection, how can we be the Easter church? How can we offer hope?

Laying Down One's Life... The Hard Way

The sacrificial language of Christ laying down his life for us has been a powerful force in our theology for a long time.

I want to name how different this can sound to a generation that rose when so much of our culture went to war together. This language sounds incredibly different to those who have literal experiences of others laying down their lives in a heroic way. We will always need this kind of bravery, it turns out. Right now there are people putting their lives in danger in Nepal, pulling out victims and survivors of the earthquake there yesterday.

But there is a danger when we use this understanding of life-giving in certain ways.

I suppose a lot of how you read this text might be summed up by what you think of Shel Silverstein's "children's book", *The Giving Tree*?^[2] The story of a tree, who gives fruit, branches, trunk, stump to make a boy happy. At first blush this is exactly that "laying down our lives" kind of behavior. To many, what we have here is a story of an abusive relationship. The tree, (she, because of course it's a she) gives all of her life to a largely ungrateful boy who alternately takes all she has to offer and then abandons her.

And, having just passed earth day, this is exactly the model we seem to take with our planet sometimes, except the bad news is, we won't have anywhere else to go afterwards.

If you're struggling with this sort of relationship, I need to say: To hold up giving your whole self away without hope of connection and gift of another's self is to deny the holiness and gift of yourself. Also, even if we put all of the saving power of Easter into Jesus's sacrifice for others, for us, doesn't it make cheap the work of his ministry, and particularly to these John believers, the relationships and love that he forged among his friends?

Laying Out One's Life

Today I want to lay out a couple of other options for how we might "lay down our lives for one another" just by playing around with what this could mean. The first is this: how can we lay *out* our lives for one another?

I'm on an Easter pledge to try and keep hyperbole out of my speech, but I'm going to ignore it: there is a dangerous understanding about what church is out in the world. So many people think that this is a container for holy people. And that is isolation at its finest, the people who are out stay out, sure they could never qualify here. And the people that are in stay "out" in all sorts of ways, shielding their fears and concerns

I read this week of a place in the Midwest called, *Esperanza House*, a community of faith of women who have survived intimate partner violence. It is not what we think of when we think of shelter. Various tasks of life are done together as a community. Many of these women have been the "giving tree" of their family systems, so one of the an important task of this life together is learning what it is to be in an interconnected relationship of care and presence.^[3]

It takes a lot of honesty to be able to rebuild relationships after relationship has been abused as much as it has been for the residents of Esperanza House. They meet people at frightening crossroads of life, filled with uncertainty and doubt, and yet they find a way together.

Each of knows isolation and pains in our lives. When I mention shame I see a lot of heads nod, because we know that fear, that anxiety, and what they cost us.

There is a popular Christian exploration of this kind of ministry and presence by the Catholic priest, Henri Nouwen's *The Wounded Healer*. Nouwen lifts up the powerful witness and gift of being able to meet one another as we are, authentically.

We are all wounded healers in our own way. The hurts we have known may not have the same shape, but they are the same hurt: loss, fear, loneliness, and pain. When we bear witness to our own wounds, faults, and fears we say what Jesus says, "Look, see, touch, I am wounded, but still I am here with you. You can live, too." What has hurt us is not to be put away (shame), nor is it to be glorified (martyrdom by us, oppression when done by others)... no, what has hurt us can be witness to God's understanding presence with those who suffer and who most need connection and relationship.

When we love one another in this way we "reassure our hearts before God, whenever our hearts condemn us; for God is greater than our hearts..." Here, we are not giving life through death, we are offering healing from our own wounds.

Laying Open One's Life

There is one other way I want to talk about life-giving behavior. There is a detail of Jesus's self-giving that really needs to be put in the context of the whole story... he does die, but by changing death, he doesn't, really... rather, he's changed into new life.

Maybe that's our ultimate modeling, laying down, laying out, laying open one's life... being willing to give of yourself, certainly, but also giving the truth of what you are and what you bear, but also giving the potential and possibility with yourself to change and to be changed.

It is not one way. We abide in Christ, and Christ in us. We give and take, change and are changed, bear with each other's wounds... Laying down, laying out, laying open our lives to God's Spirit, here to meet where we have fallen, and raise us still. Amen.

-
1. All sermons are an oral tradition that live in the space between the preacher and the congregation. I encourage you to listen along, as sometimes the text and what is said in the sanctuary may be different. ↩
 2. For just a taste of how much division this book can cause, see a little back and forth between two reviewers: ['The Giving Tree': Tender Story of Unconditional Love or Disturbing Tale of Selfishness?](#), *The New York Times* ↩
 3. ["Salvific Communities and Practices of Resistance: A Feminist Theological Response to Trauma"](#), *The Other Journal* ↩