

Life Laid Down

John 10:11-18

One of the hottest shows this year just ended its run on Friday. *The Falcon and the Winter Soldier* continued the story of Captain America's two friends and potential successors after the events of *Avengers: Endgame*. It's dealt with the greyer issues around what makes a hero.

But what everyone seems to agree about, though, is that Steve Rogers was who needed to be Captain America. In the first Captain America film, Steve Rogers is a small, scrawny guy who's been rejected from the army many times. He gets picked for the super soldier program because of his determination. At one point in the training, the colonel in charge grabs a dummy grenade and tosses it towards the group of hopeful soldiers. Everyone else runs away, but Steve Rogers runs toward the grenade, covering it with his body. Even though he'd undergone hazing from his fellow soldiers, he still was willing to lay down his life to save them. The film ends with Captain America crashing the massive bomber into the ocean, laying down his life to save others, even those he didn't know. That was what made him worthy of becoming Captain America.

But that's not the kind of hero we usually want. We don't want someone who lays down their life and then is done. We want someone who is good enough, strong enough, quick enough, that they don't have to lay down their life.

In the Gospel lesson today, Jesus gives us a different view of heroism as he describes himself as the Good Shepherd. He is not going to twirl his shepherd's crook ninja style to beat back the wolves. He's not going to pull out a sling and hit every wolf right between the eyes to save the sheep. He's going to lay down his life.

Jesus says he is the Good Shepherd, and he lays down his life for the sheep. He says this not once, not twice, but five times in these few verses. Five times! At first it sounds ridiculous: what fool of a shepherd would die for his sheep? How can he fulfill his duties after he's dead? How could he care for his sheep? How can he guide the sheep? How can he guard the sheep? A shepherd giving his life for his sheep only works if it eliminates the threats.

But when Jesus laid down his life for us on the cross, he did defeat all of the threats to our lives. As we read from Luther's explanation of the second article of the Apostles' Creed, Jesus "won [us] from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil, not with gold or silver, but with His holy, precious blood and with His innocent suffering and death." Jesus laid down his life not as a victim, but in victory over sin, death, and the power of the devil. His death defeated the wolves that threatened his sheep.

As foolish as it seems to think of a shepherd laying his life down for the sheep, it's even more foolish to think of someone laying down their life for their enemies. As Paul wrote to the Romans, "For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die—but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us." When we were sinners, when we were the enemies of God, Jesus loved us so much that he laid his life down for us, died for us on the cross. He loved us so much that he died for us, of his own free choice as the ultimate act of love. Even though we're often unlovable, even though we often reject his love, God loves us anyway. God loves us so much that God chose to love us, to send Jesus to die for us.

This love of Jesus that would drive him to lay down his life for you and me is not some passive thing done to him. Jesus is not the victim here; he is the victor, actively striving and seeking your salvation by laying down his life for you, giving up his life in battle with your enemies...for you! "I lay down my life that I may take it up again," Jesus said. "No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again" (John 10:17-18). Jesus didn't lay down his life on a whim or without knowing what he was doing. Jesus laid down his life on the cross because he knew it was the only way to save you from sin, death, and the devil. Jesus descended into the valley of the shadow of death, because he knew that only by going there himself could he lead you out of death and into life. Jesus had the authority to lay down his life, and he had the authority to take it up again. And because of that, Jesus has the authority to give you forgiveness and eternal life.

We call Jesus the Good Shepherd because he lays down his life for the sheep. The Greek word for good, though, *kalos*, also means beautiful or noble. Maybe that helps us understand things a bit better, thinking, "Jesus was the noble shepherd" more than Jesus was the good shepherd. Why was Jesus noble? Because he was willing to lay down his life for the sheep? That is always the source of nobility. Why was Mother Theresa noble? Because she was willing to lay down her life for others. She put the needs of others before herself. Why was St. Francis of Assisi noble? Because he was willing to lay down his life for others. He wrote: "It is in giving that we receive. It is in dying (to self) that we are born to a living hope." That is love. That is true love. Jesus laid down his life for us and we are invited to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters. Jesus also said in John 15, "No greater love has

a person than this than they lay down their lives for their friends.

Because that's what Jesus did, and it is part of what Jesus then calls us to do, we often ask, what would you be willing to die for? What would you give your life for? The problem is, that's the wrong question. Most of you will not be called upon to fall on a grenade to save your fellow soldiers, give up an organ to save a family member, or take a bullet to save the president. You will probably not be called on to die in order to sell a few more widgets, build a few more buildings, or make a few more dollars.

Author Don Miller also tells us that asking what you're willing to die for is the wrong question. "Dying for something is easy because it is associated with glory. Living for something is the hard thing. Living for something extends beyond fashion, glory, or recognition. We live for what we believe."

And so, we lay down our lives. We honor some who lay down their lives. The last year has featured people supporting the front line workers. Every day, it seemed, Mary Greeley Medical Center was posting pictures of food donated to the medical workers, and similar stories happened across the country and across the world. Teachers and parents sacrificed to try to teach kids virtually. We've sacrificed this year to protect others during the pandemic, or sacrificed to give to others to support them in their times of need.

We can only do those things because of what Jesus did for us. As the Good Shepherd, he laid down his life out of love for us, and calls us to follow him in laying down our lives for each other out of love. But Jesus didn't only die for us; he lives for us, as well. Because Jesus lives, we too live new lives, lives of sacrifice and service.

As the end of the semester approaches, as life continues to be full of change, as pain still comes into our lives, remember that you are all sheep of the Good Shepherd, who laid down his life for you, to forgive you for all the things that will go wrong, to sustain you and lead you in the ways that you should go. When you walk through the valley of the shadow of death, Jesus is with you. Through him, you live. In him, you die. And, by him, you will be raised to eternal life.

This is the Good News of the Good Shepherd: Christ laid down his life for us when we couldn't, and wouldn't lay down our lives. When you fear that you have wandered far from the fold, Jesus finds you and brings you back. And when you know that you have nothing, absolutely nothing, to offer God, he offers you himself. This has nothing to do with what kind of sheep we've been. It has everything to do with the love and mercy of the Good Shepherd. He's the Good Shepherd, and he lays down his life for the sheep. The Good Shepherd is with you and before you and in you—and for you. That's a promise we can trust.

Pastor David Beagley
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