

Fourth Sunday of Easter
Good Shepherd Sunday
April 22, 2018

Text: 1 John 3:16-24
Theme: "Lay It On the Line!"

Why did the chicken stop in the middle of the road? Because she wanted to lay it on the line. It gets better from here. To lay it on the line is to put it out there in the open. This is just the way it is. I'm not going to hold back. To lay it on the line also opens one up to vulnerability. It is out there in the open for others to see, assess, agree with or not, or even attack.

There's a lot of laying it on the line in our readings for this day, this Good Shepherd Sunday. We see Peter laying in on the line before the Sanhedrin. 'You want to know how this man has been healed. Here's how it is. Here's who did it, the very One whom you crucified. Jesus lays it on the line as far as the difference between the hired hand and the Shepherd. John lays it on the line as to what the Good Shepherd calls us and enables us to do. They are all interrelated.

So let's lay it on the line. I just happen to have the line right here (blue strip of paper). John lays it on the line about love. Here's how we even know love. We know love because He (Jesus) laid down His life for us. It's the apex of love. It is all gift. It is not earned at all. In love God gives His Son. In love the Son gives His life. It's what Jesus tells us He is going to do in our Gospel lesson for today. "I lay down my life for the sheep." (John 10:14) "For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay

down my life that I may take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down on my own accord....This charge I have received from my Father.” (John 10:15, 17-18)

This is what Jesus did. John tells us now it's our turn, our turn brother and sister in Christ. Since Jesus laid down His life for us, “We ought to lay down our lives for the brothers.” (vs 16) That's quite an ought. You could translate it, “we are indebted (**ovfeilw**, **opheilo**) to lay down our lives for our brothers.” It's part of letting no debt remain outstanding except that to love one another (Romans 13:8). It is unusual for someone to have the opportunity to actually carry that out, that is lay down one's life. “For one would scarcely die for a righteous person, though, perhaps for a good person one might dare to die.” (Romans 5:7)

John lays more on the line before us. Yes, laying down the life is rare, but there is something that is much more common flowing from the same love, laying down the goods to help a brother or sister in need. Brother or sister refers to fellow believers, members of the household of faith with us. Let's start with those whom we know, like those in our own congregation, or believers who are our neighbors, or family members. Sometimes those around us are the least likely to let us know of need. Yet, we do have occasion. There is need right before us.

We have done this. We have had times of “success” in such loving. You gave of your resources to help a brother or sister. Now it could have been in some general way as contributing to disaster relief, or putting together kits for Lutheran World Relief. It may have been more personal

such as distributing winter clothing to those in need (which we did a couple of times) or volunteering at Helping Neighbors. It may have been giving some money to a person you knew was having a hard time and saying, “Here, I hope this will help.”

You may have had a reward from this. You see it in the recipient’s face. You were very pleased to have been able to help in this small way. You weren’t doing it for recognition but out of love and yet you are rewarded by seeing benefit from help given.

But we can also remember failure, I can. There was a brother in need, we had the resources, but, ‘no, can’t help you with that.’ “If anyone sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him...” (vs 18) The gut says, “do this,” there is need and means, but the door is closed, even slammed on compassion. Maybe it’s greed talking, or anxiety, or worry—no!!! Can we not remember such times? Let me share a personal example.

This was years ago. Our boys were still boys. We were traveling between Jonesboro and Indiana. I think we are on the way back. We stopped at a fast food place in Charleston, Missouri. At the entrance to the restaurant stood a man and woman. They were asking for money. He pointed to a car in the parking lot with his children. They looked pretty tired. I don’t remember their whole story, never heard it actually. I was not in a story hearing mood. I have heard a lot of pleas for help over the years, but this one I would not hear. As soon as I saw him I knew I was not going to help—no time, little money, my family was around. Any door to compassion was just slammed shut. Whether their need was legit or not

is not the point, the point is I wasn't interested in learning, just locked the door.

John writes, "By this we know that we are of the truth, and reassure our hearts before Him." (vs 19) Yes, when we do the right thing that is quite reassuring, but if our hearts condemn us. And they do. I have not laid down my life, but if the need was there, could I do that? I have not always laid down the goods when there was need and means—no love of God in us? Now, that's not a reassuring thought at all. Our hearts do condemn, but John doesn't leave it at that. He has more to say to us. He tells us God is greater than our hearts.

God has laid it on the line for us, become quite vulnerable by choice. God the Son laid it on the line by laying aside the glory that was His from eternity. He take the form of man, becomes flesh and made His dwelling among us. The Good Shepherd comes to offer Himself for the sheep. He is nothing like the hireling. The hired hand shepherd (if you want to call him that) watches the sheep for the sake of the shepherd. He has something to gain. And when it becomes evident there will be more pain than gain, danger approaches, he's gone, flees. He is not ready to face the wolf—too dangerous—blood could be spilled. No, the God Shepherd is not like that. He does lay His life on the line. Blood is definitely spilled He is all in.

Yes, our hearts condemn us. Our hearts are constantly being stained by sin and looking at our hearts in the mirror of God's law we get a much fuller picture of the stain. It is so bad. There is condemnation. But oh the

love of the Good Shepherd. “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.” (Romans 5:7-8) We were those aligned against Him because of sin. Yes, God knows all, knows the full extent of our sinfulness, yet He dies for us. And now, and now there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, for the law of the Spirit of life has freed you from the law of sin and death.” (Romans 8:1, 2) Our sin was laid aside from us and laid astride on Jesus.

We have been forgiven, made new, made new to lay aside any commitment to sin. John makes this clear throughout his letter. “No one who keeps on sinning has either seen Him or known Him.” (3:6) We lay aside sin. We lay into the service put right before us.

We lay into speaking the truth. Look how Peter is doing that in our lesson from Acts 4. This formerly denying Peter, this Peter who with the other ten was in hiding, now there is no denying and no hiding, no stopping the message. He has seen the resurrected Lord, like John has heard and touched Him. On him has been poured out the Spirit. He just lays it out there before the same men who had condemned his Lord. “...by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead—by Him, this man is standing before you....And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name given under heaven, given among men by which we must be saved.” (Acts 4:10, 12)

We are freed to speak the truth to one another. We are freed, freed from fear to ask in the truth. John tells us we have confidence, boldness, we ask. We ask through our Good Shepherd. He gives what we need to accomplish those things pleasing to Him.

We lay into asking and we lay into trusting. John says we received because we keep His commandments and do what pleases Him.” (vs 22) And what are those commandments? “And this is His commandment, that we believe in the name of His Son Jesus Christ and love one another.” (vs 23) John has the same message as Paul. John’s is more cyclical or maybe even spiraling. We remember Paul’s words, “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing, not by works so no one can boast. For we are His workmanship created in Christ Jesus to do good works which God prepared beforehand for us to do.” (Ephesians 2:8-10) Our salvation is God’s doing in Jesus, a free gift. He has remade us to love, to do His good.

In the end it is not the works that assure us, works are the fruit, the results, not the final assurance. “And by this we know that He abides in us, by the Spirit whom He has given us.” (vs 24) Again, the same as Paul— "by the Spirit of adoption, we cry, ‘Abba, Father.’”(Romans 8:16) That Spirit is at work through God’s Word. That Spirit is poured out in baptism.

God has laid in the line concerning death and life. The Good Shepherd laid it on the line for us, gave His life and took it up again that we may lay it on the line in His service. For Jesus’ sake. Amen

