

**Davidson College Presbyterian Church**  
**Davidson, North Carolina**  
**The Rev. Robert M. Alexander**  
**John 10:11-18 and 1 John 3:16-24**  
**“Laying Down Our Lives”**  
**4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter**  
**April 26, 2015**

There is a story about a young pastor who was leading a Children’s Moment during worship based on the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm. He told the children about sheep – about how they weren’t very smart and how they often wandered off and got tangled up in briars or got into some other kind of mess. The shepherd kept them close by, protecting them from the danger of wild animals and making sure that they had enough pasture where they could graze. He then pointed to the children and explained to them that they were like sheep and needed lots of guidance. Then he stood up and with his eyebrows raised asked them – “Now if you are the sheep, who do you suppose is the shepherd?” It was clear to the congregation that he intended for them to name him as the shepherd. But instead, one of the boys said – “Jesus! Jesus is the shepherd!” Well this obviously caught the young pastor by surprise. But he went on to ask, “Well then who am I?”

The little boy frowned and thought a few seconds. Shrugging he said, “I guess you must be a sheep dog!”

In our scriptures this morning we have heard of the work of the Good Shepherd who cares for the sheep, protects the sheep, and lays down his life for the sheep. We have also read about how, as members of Christ’s family, we are to carry out a similar kind of work – laying down our own lives for one another. But guess what? That doesn’t make us the shepherd! That job is taken! As Psalm 100 reminds us – we all are sheep in God’s pasture! Our reformed theology teaches us about the “priesthood of all believers,” Jesus Christ, the only Good Shepherd, is the only mediator between God and humanity and we all are called to minister to one another in the family of faith. True – some have special roles and we are all gifted in different ways – and each of us has a significant and crucial part to play in the Body of Christ. We need each other. And Jesus teaches us the most important quality that we must have in order to survive and to thrive: sacrificial love.

Our gospel lesson compares and contrasts the Good Shepherd with the hired hand. The Good Shepherd lays down his life for the sheep and the hired hand runs away when danger approaches. The Good Shepherd cares for the sheep because they belong to him – they know him and he knows them. The Good Shepherd chooses out of love to give up his own life for the wellbeing of the sheep – his life for theirs.

In 1 John we read that this same attitude should be among the sheep in the sheep fold. We know what love is because Jesus has shown us by laying down his life for us. Therefore we ought to lay down our lives for one another. What does this mean? Does this refer to some kind of martyrdom? Is it like the soldier who is willing to go to battle to offer his or her life for their country? Is it like the secret service agent who is willing to take a bullet for the President? Well – perhaps. I am not going to say that it doesn’t sometimes come to this. But the verses that follow suggest that there is more to it.

In the next verse we are asked to consider the times when we have seen a brother or sister in need and have failed to give of ourselves in order to help them out. This sounds like it refers specifically to worldly, physical needs – food, shelter, clothing, money, etc. We can think of need in lots of ways:

Physical, Emotional, Spiritual, Psychological, and Social to name just a few. We as human beings have many needs. And this passage invites us to set aside our own position, our own privilege, our own resources, and our own security for the welfare of others. Laying down my life is giving up some part of me to meet the need of another.

Perhaps you heard the news about Mr. R.J. Robert Jarosz is the crossing guard at Cornelius Elementary School. You may have heard that he was hit by a car this past week while on duty. We have enjoyed getting to know Mr. R.J. over the last few years. He is a kind and thoughtful man who takes his job very seriously. While on duty this past Thursday Mr. R.J. was hit by someone who didn't see him in the crosswalk. He was taken to CMC Main for treatment. Friday's article in Corneliusnews.net stated that "the white bearded Jarosz didn't just guide students across the crosswalk – he won their hearts too. When children arrived in the morning and left after the bell rang he was there to stop traffic and guide them across the street...he was a hero for the hundreds of children that he protected." Mr. R.J. put himself in harm's way every day to protect the children of Cornelius Elementary. He's 82 years old and 2 months from retirement and of course, we are all praying that he will be ok. Mr. R.J. helps me to see love in action – laying his life on the line for the wellbeing of others!

Eugene Peterson's *The Message* translates 1 John 3:16, 17 this way. "This is how we've come to understand and experience love: Christ sacrificed his life for us. This is why we ought to live sacrificially for our fellow believers, and not just be out for ourselves. If you see some brother or sister in need and have the means to do something about it but turn a cold shoulder and do nothing, what happens to God's love? It disappears. And you made it disappear." That's pretty point blank!

It seems simple enough – if you notice a need then do something to meet it. Don't just talk about love. Love is more than words...it is about truth and action! Love is a verb! This applies both inside and outside the church walls. And we're pretty good at it in certain instances. But it takes some effort to really understand the needs in the world around us. I think partly because we don't really know one another. There are people sitting pretty close by this morning that we don't know. We have no idea what their needs are. We have no idea what resource we might possess that would make a difference in their lives. We even make assumptions about those we think we know without really taking time to stop and pay attention and listen. This too requires a giving up of self.

### **SHOW COMPASSION VIDEO HERE**

Mennonite Pastor Isaac Villegas in his reflection on the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm wrote that "the gospel can be summed up in the psalmist's word 'with.' – that God is with us – that we are with one another, and that we are with God when we are with one another (as in 'where two or three are gathered in my name there I am with you'). With involves the companionship of solidarity, and solidarity is at the heart of the gospel." (Christian Century, April 15, 2015. P. 19)

When I read this I immediately thought of a story told by Davidson College student Liz Engle at the presentation given by the College Nicaragua Team last Sunday in our Congregation House. Liz shared about her experience of a home stay in the rural community of La Joya, Nicaragua. This is how she described the home of her host Teresa and her three children. The home consists of a wooden frame, filled in with a mud floor and walls, topped by a corrugated tin roof. There are three rooms – the kitchen, where the fire over which Teresa cooks fills the whole house with smoke; the main room, furnished with

a table and a bench; and a third room which Liz was never invited to see but where the family sleeps. Liz slept on the floor of the main room, and judging by the way the children marveled at the mattresses they had brought, she doubted they had ever seen a mattress before. The community has had electricity for about six months, but there is no running water and Teresa's home does not have a latrine.

Liz explained that she had done her best to understand and learn about poverty through her studies but that her ability to live in solidarity with others in such conditions was hampered by distance. During their visit – the distance had been removed. It was when she had the opportunity to go with her host to get water from a nearby stream that she really felt like she was in solidarity with them. She had read about poverty plenty of times but she had never experienced the life of one who lived it every day. It wasn't until she walked to the stream and filled the bucket and carried it back to the house on her head and felt the weight of that full bucket pressing down upon her spine that she began to really feel like she could even begin to understand Teresa's life. It was then that she experienced what Villegas named solidarity – being with someone.

We have experienced this kind of solidarity on many occasions here at DCPC and in our individual lives:

- When our mission teams go to Nicaragua to meet our partners in Kilambe – when we walk along the same dusty roads where they walk and eat the same rice and beans and tortillas that they eat. When we sit with them in their homes in their communities and listen to their cuentas – their stories - about their lives, and their sueños – their dreams about their future. It is then that we are in solidarity with them – we are letting go of our own selves just a little bit in order to be with another, to understand them, and to love them where they are.
- When we sit at someone's bedside in the hospital or in the nursing home or in their bedroom and wait – when we listen to the doctor explain a diagnosis and when we ask questions – when we feed them ice chips or give them a sip of water – when we stay and pray and wait longer than we think we have time to wait because we don't want them to be alone then we are beginning to let go of ourselves just a little bit. We are laying our lives aside for a time – for another.
- When we serve our brothers and sisters who are guests through Room in the Inn – when we sit with them and hear their stories – when we eat with them – when we break bread - and enjoy the gift of a meal together. When we give up our resources to prepare a meal or our time to sleep over in the Congregation House. We are taking time to understand someone else's life – we are laying our lives aside for a time.
- When we give up our time and resources to respond to the needs that we see – whether building a house, or serving a meal, or giving a coat or a blanket, or giving someone a ride, or giving some money – we are in a sense laying our lives aside and we are sharing love – the same kind of sacrificial love that we have been shown in Jesus Christ.
- And even when we sit down with someone who usually sits on the other side of the sanctuary/chapel or in another worship service entirely – or someone who hasn't been to worship in a year and we take time to listen more than to talk and we seek to understand where they are in life and how our lives might intersect in some meaningful way for the betterment of the whole Body – then we have laid aside our own lives for a time and shown love in an active and truth-filled way.

1 John tells us that this is a confirmation to our hearts that we belong to God. When we live this out we affirm our faith in the one who has first shown us love. We affirm our desire to be faithful to his command to love one another.

Ronald Cole-Turner writes that “Believing and loving come from a single grace and result in a single act of obedience. The commandment cannot be split apart, because Jesus Christ is the concrete embodiment of God’s love.” (Ronald Cole-Turner. Feasting on the Word: Year B, Vol. 2. WJK. P. 446)

On the front of your bulletin there is a picture of Jesus, the Good Shepherd. This is a drawing by Thomas Berry, a resident of Davidson, and a new friend of mine. Thomas and I are pretty different. He is older than me, he is of a different race, he lives in a different part of town, he has a different skills and interests and he is my brother. We could make a lot of assumptions about one another and that would get us nowhere. Instead we have enjoyed getting to know one another over the last several months.

At the top of his drawing are words taken from Acts 16. You may remember the story of Paul and Silas in jail in Philippi. During the night while they were singing songs of praise to God, a miraculous earthquake shook the foundations of the jail and released them from their prison cell. The jailer, fearing that the prisoners had escaped, prepared to take his own life but Paul called out and stopped him. The jailer, moved by the situation, asked, “What must I do to be saved?” Paul responded, “Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household.” (Acts 16:31) Then they went to the jailer’s house and he washed their wounds. Belief followed by an act of love. They go hand in hand. They cannot be separated.

You may have read the article in the Observer this past week about David Moore – a man who turned himself in to authorities after escaping from prison. He had been on the run for almost forty years after jumping over a prison fence in 1976. The Sherriff who was quoted in the article said, “I think he was just tired of running!” David Moore layed down his life. I don’t know whether or not he is a man of faith but I know that he finally stopped running and faced the truth.

That is one way to think about laying down our lives - to stop running... and we do a lot of running. Running from God...running from responsibility...running from ourselves...running from one another. This is another kind of prison that keeps us from experiencing the abundant, resurrection life that we are meant to have in Jesus Christ. When we are on the run we cannot experience the wonder of being with – of solidarity – of relationship – of intimacy – of knowing and of being known – of believing and then acting on that faith through acts of love.

Today we are invited to stop running. To stop running from God and to allow the Good Shepherd to welcome us home. To stop running from our calling and to accept it and live it out in the world around us. To stop running from one another and to take time to get to know one another so that we might recognize one another’s need in such a way that we could truly lay down our lives for one another.

Friends – we are not asked to be the shepherd of the sheep. That job is in good hands – the nail scared hands of Jesus. We are, however, asked to learn from the Good Shepherd about what it means to love – about what it means to give of ourselves for the sake of others. May we find in this community of faith – a safe place where we know one another and where we are known. May we know and respond to the shepherd’s voice and may we give ourselves to one another - sacrificially and freely.

**To God be the Glory! Amen.**