

Laying Down Our Lives

“We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us – and we ought to lay down our lives for one another.”

The first verse of Scripture that I ever memorized as a child, I actually didn’t know was Scripture at the time. I heard it in a movie – I think it was a Disney movie – and the phrase was so compelling to me that I just took it into myself on the spot.

The phrase was: “Greater love hath no man than this – that he lay down his life for his friend.”

It’s such a compelling verse. It’s a verse that catches us with its truth, and we recognize that yes, this act of love – utterly giving oneself for another, even to the point of facing death, is the most powerful example of love we can know.

It’s inspiring. It made me, as a child, want to be able to love with that kind of intensity – to be willing to give of myself in some way for my friends.

It was only later that I learned that this verse was said by Jesus, and that in it he spoke of his love for us, and his willingness to die for us.

It’s a verse I often think of now on Good Friday, when I especially take time to look to the cross and meditate on God’s self-offering love for us.

But I think somewhere along the way, learning that the verse applied to Jesus, I began thinking of it primarily as a line *about* Jesus, about him giving up his life for us, and I stopped thinking about it as much as an example for us to follow.

But this verse we heard today from the first letter of St. John leaves no question that that is what we are called to:

“We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us – and we ought to lay down our lives for one another.”

The story of Christianity, and of human life in general, is in fact full of examples of just this kind of love, shown by one human being to another.

One 20th century example that comes to my mind is the story of Maximilian Kolbe, who was recognized as a saint by Pope John Paul II, and who also has a statue as one of the 20th century martyrs at Westminster Abbey.

Maximilian Kolbe was a Franciscan priest who lived in Poland at the time of World War II. He and his fellow Franciscan brothers used their monastery to hide thousands of Jews and other refugees from the Nazis after they invaded Poland.

Fr. Kolbe himself was of German descent, and the Nazis pressured him to register himself as a Germanic person who would receive all the privileges of German citizenship. But he refused and would not accept such preferential discrimination.

Eventually, because of his work in hiding people from the Nazis and his publication of writings denouncing the Nazi occupation and philosophy, he was arrested, and he was sent to the concentration camp of Auschwitz.

Fr. Kolbe was remarkable among the concentration camp prisoners. The brutal treatment and constant threat of death from starvation, hardship, or violence reduced many people to a single-minded desperation to survive.

But he continued to care for others. He served many people as a priest in secret. He also shared his meagre food with others who were starving, which often led him to go hungry.

His ability to continue to love and serve his fellow prisoners and his continued faith in the love of God, even in the face of such hardship, inspired and gave hope to those around him.

And so he was singled out for mistreatment by the prison guards, who did everything they could to crush hope and demoralize the prisoners to the point that they wouldn't look out for or care for each other.

And then one day three prisoners escaped from the camp. In retribution the Nazi guards announced that 10 men would be sentenced to death by starvation to discourage others from attempting the same escape. 10 names were read. One of the men who was named cried out in despair for his wife and children who would never see him again.

And Maximilian Kolbe stepped forward, and offered himself in the man's place. He said that he was a Roman Catholic priest and had no family of his own, and that he was willing to die instead, so that this man could one day return to his family. And the prison guards allowed it, and he went with the other 9 men to a painful and slow death.

And the man whose place he took survived, and after the war was reunited to his wife, and spent his life telling people about the incredible love that had been shown him by a man who had been a stranger to him.

“We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us – and we ought to lay down our lives for one another.”

Such stories remind us of the incredible, transcendent beauty of human love. And they remind us of the love of God, who made us humans capable in some measure of having that same kind of love, that God also has for each of us.

And such stories, the story of Maximilian Kolbe, or the story of Jesus Christ, his model, invite us to consider how deep our love is for each other, and what we are willing to give, or give up.

Many of us will not face the possibility of giving up our lives by dying for another person. But we each have the choice of how we will give our lives by living. What we will give of our lives to others. How we will share our time and our gifts and our resources with friends, and family, and even with strangers, who are bound to us as human brothers and sisters.

This call to give of ourselves is inspiring, and noble, and even heroic. But it is also urgent. St. John in his letter immediately follows the verse I have quoted now three times with this question: “How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help?”

Stories and Scripture verses inspire us to serve, but we can't just leave this place feeling inspired. We are being propelled out the doors to go and serve those who need us. We each have been called to missions that Jesus has entrusted particularly to each one of us. We are needed for the service of the world.

I pray that we may each find joy in the service we, in particular, are called to.

I pray that we may each glimpse the love of God as we serve and perhaps as we are served.

And I pray that we may be propelled out those doors with the energy to go now and carry Love to all the places of this world where it is so urgently needed.

Amen.