

Sermon delivered by The Rev. Chana Tetzlaff at St. Christopher's Episcopal Church, April 21, 2024
Easter 4B, Text: 1 John 3:16-24

Many of you may not be aware that a significant, deeply unifying event took place this past Friday. An event that brought people all around the world together in a collective moment of simultaneous joy and heartbreak at the depth of human emotion on display, a moment where a generation pronounced wonder at the beauty of a heart broken open and generously poured out. Now, you may be thinking I'm talking about something religious... in a way... I speak of the unexpected delivery of the double anthology that is Taylor Swift's new album. An album exploring the emotional roller coaster of seeking a committed love, of seeking to know and be known. An album that raises the lament that so many in our deeply divided world raise every day: "*You swore that you loved me but where were the clues? I died on the altar waiting for the proof*".ⁱ

It's a question that Jesus could also, and in a way did, ask as he laid down *his* life for those claiming to love and know him.

So too, exhorts the Elder, the author of the first letter of John, albeit slightly differently: *Let us love not [only] in word or speech but in truth and action. For how does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees one in need, but closes his heart against her?*ⁱⁱ It's not a stretch to equate the Elder, this beloved writer of a beloved letter to the Church, as an Influencer of his Era in the way he exhorts the church to open our hearts, in the Greek in the same way one opens one's innards, one's spleen, to pour ourselves out with generosity and vulnerability to those in need around us. But unlike Taylor, the Elder has an unshakeable foundation to offer us, God's committed love for God's own, demonstrated in Jesus's own decision to love the believers even unto death.

Love is not truly love unless it is demonstrated, experienced, manifested in practical actions. As the Elder read the Gospel of John, and the commandment Jesus gave to love and serve one another as Jesus loved and served his disciples in washing their feet, the Elder demands that the community of believers *embody* this love in tangible actions, not just nice words. His letter is particularly powerful as his own community lived through a time of deep division and rupture. Painful separations from families, bitter dissent about Jesus's teachings and

purpose, hostility from the wider outside community, were all very real threats to Christian unity. So the elder encourages them, and us, to emulate Jesus way of loving: “Let us love not [only] in word or speech but in truth and action.” And so we ought to lay down our lives for fellow children of God. The Elder is sure that if we do so, we will receive confidence, when we ask for it, from a steadfast God who is faithful even when our own hearts are wavering.

But what does it mean to lay down our life for another? Does he mean by death, exactly as Jesus did? It very well might, in certain situations. But to lay down one’s life doesn’t always require heroics, in the way we think of a soldier or altruist charging into danger to save the life of others. Often, laying down our life is much more accessible, though perhaps not any easier.

Theologian and ethicist, Ronald Cole-Turner, suggests that “more often the stakes are lower...” but “in every age Christians have acted with Christlike love, [by] going where they do not *have* to go and suffering what they *could* easily avoid... Laying down our lives, at its core, can mean any number of ways in which we lay aside our claim to own our lives. We lay down our lives when we put others first. We lay down our lives when we live for the good of others. We lay down our lives when we make time for others... When we lay down the completely normal human desire to live for ourselves, and instead allow the love of God to reorient us toward the needs of others, we *are* laying down our lives.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Likewise, Biblical scholar Gail O’Day notes that “to interpret Jesus’ death as the *ultimate* act of love enables the believer to see that the love to which Jesus summons the community is not the giving *up* of one’s life but the giving *away* of one’s life. The distinction ... is important because the love Jesus embodies is *grace*, not sacrifice. Jesus gave his life to his disciples as an expression of the *fullness* of his relationship with God and of God’s love for the world... Jesus did not deny himself;” he chose to lay down his life and “he lived his vocation and identity fully...Jesus’s death in love, therefore, was not an act of self-denial but an act of fullness, of living out his life and identity fully even when that living would ultimately lead to death.” She points out that this new commandment Jesus gives his disciples, “love one another as I have loved you,” sounds softer and easier than

“love your neighbor” or “love your enemy” but that “in many ways it is easier to love one’s enemies because one might not have to deal with them every day.”^{iv}

To love someone means that we have to allow them to be fully themselves even as we are fully and completely ourselves. When this happens successfully, people grow together. But there has to be mutual giving and receiving. And how we love each other, how we honor or dismiss one another, demonstrates to the world around us whether we are *truly* Jesus’s disciples or not.

When we encounter someone who challenges our preconceptions and assumptions about how things are supposed to work, we tend to shut out and push away the one who doesn’t belong, the one whose beliefs don’t fit with our own. But when we live from a place of openness – a place of God’s own welcome, generosity, and grace – we find ways to include and welcome even those unwilling to include or welcome us. Because God’s love makes possible creative space with room enough to include everyone, even those we think unredeemable.

“*So who’s gonna hold you? Who’s gonna know you?*”^v The Elder says, there’s nothing to *decode*: God holds and knows you, and Christ’s actions make God’s love known. And the way we follow, as we watch and listen in all the places we might find ourselves among those in need, is showing we truly love those we encounter in truth and action. Love comes from the inward movement of our hearts opening the way God’s heart opens to us, not closing off. Love is our active and willing response, meeting the needs we see or hear with the gifts and resources God gives each one of us to build up one another. And God will meet us where we are, not expecting perfection, simply for us to act in love. Because, as St. Teresa of Calcutta showed us, where there is love, there is God.

ⁱ Swift, Taylor song lyric from “So Long, London” on Tortured Poets Department by Taylor Swift, Jack Antonoff, and Aaron Dessner (Republic Records, 2024)

ⁱⁱ Paraphrase off NRSV translation and Greek word study

ⁱⁱⁱ Cole-Turner, “1 John 3:16-24, Theological Perspective” in *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, vol. 2, ed. by David L Bartlett, Barbara Brown Taylor (Westminster John Knox Press, 2008).

^{iv} O’Day, “The Gospel of John,” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, vol. 9, ed. by Leander Keck (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), p. 734-35.

^v Swift, Taylor song lyric from “Tortured Poets Department”, *ibid.*