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St. Paul's Lutheran Church
2100 16th Street SW
Austin, MN 55912-1749
Pastor Ted Barthels
Sermon preached on
March 31, 2019
4th Sunday in Lent

Scripture Lessons: Isaiah 53:4-9, Passion: Pilate/Barabbas
Hymns: 140; 154; 170; 409:1

Grace be unto you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Sermon Text: 1 John 3:16-18

“By this we know love, because He laid down His life for us. And we also ought to lay down *our* lives for the brethren. ¹⁷ But whoever has this world's goods, and sees his brother in need, and shuts up his heart from him, how does the love of God abide in him? ¹⁸ My little children, let us not love in word or in tongue, but in deed and in truth.
(NKJV)

This is the Word of God.

Sanctify us, oh Lord, through Your truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

In Christ Jesus, God our Savior, dear fellow Redeemed:

INTRO: Reacting to Jesus' Passion

Many people find Lent to be a very emotional spiritual time. A thoughtful reading the Passion History will pull at the heart strings. How can anyone read of the things that Jesus endured without getting emotional at least to some degree? What we read is brutal, and Jesus endured it all for us. What the different people did to Jesus along the way was so cold hearted. The physical abuse along with

the taunting ridicule is enough to make one angry. And yet Jesus endured it all without anger, without sinning in return. Indeed we read of His love and forgiveness being extended to those who mocked and abused, and tortured Him. Yes, one can go into quite a bit of detail about how brutal scourging was, and crucifixion. And I have done that to a small degree. It is an important part of our Christian education so that we might appreciate exactly what Jesus endured at least on that physical level, even though we are not able to comprehend what Jesus endured on a spiritual level. And yes, an emotional response is quite normal, and to a certain degree it is appropriate. Gratitude toward Jesus, sorrow over our own sin, these are appropriate emotional responses to the gospel not only during Lent but throughout the year, throughout our lives.

In our text this morning the Apostle John directs us toward another kind of response to Jesus' passion, but to get there we need to remember the real essence of what Jesus actually did, to what exactly we are responding. --

THEME: He Laid Down His Life For Us.

This was --

I. His Sacrifice for Us.

In our text we read some very remarkable words:

1 John 3:16a "By this we know love, because He laid down His life for us."

We allude to this act of grace so frequently, and well we should; indeed as confessing believers in Christ that is what we do! We do this so often that I'm afraid we start to forget exactly what we are confessing. We just confessed the Apostle's Creed. In the Apostle's Creed we say it all quite succinctly, "*He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead (or died) and was buried.*" Stop and think about what we are saying with these words. First of all we

must say yet again this isn't just anybody. This isn't just another man suffering a grave injustice at the hands of other men. This is the Son of Man who was foretold by the prophets to come into the world to save us. We say all these things so often we forget that this was the Son of God who *"was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary."* This is the eternal Son *"by whom all things were made."* (Nicene Creed) He is the most holy God. He was, is and ever shall be the great I AM! This is who the "He" is in our text.

Who are the "us" in these words, "He laid down His life for **us**?" We sang in the sermon hymn:

*"Alas! And did my Savior bleed, And did my Sovereign die?
Would He devote that sacred head For such a worm as I?"*
(The Lutheran Hymnal 154:1)

My Savior, my Sovereign - my God. Jesus whose head was indeed sacred died for a **worm** like me. Most hymnals have changed the word worm to something else. People don't like thinking of themselves as worms. In fact when we speak of exactly how low we are spiritually this is criticized by others as "worm theology." It is criticized because we tear down people's estimation of their own goodness and self-value. Maybe we need that. There is no maybe to that. In this context, when we are viewing our contribution and worth toward our salvation we need to understand what the Scriptures teach; *"we were dead in trespasses and sins,"* (Ephesians 2:1) we *"were by nature children of wrath."* (Ephesians 2:3) Would it be right to think of ourselves as being higher than that when our Lord Jesus in the depths of His agony thought, *"But I am a worm, and no man; A reproach of men, and despised by the people."*

(Psalm 22:6)

"He laid down His life for us!" Those words convey the wonder of grace that is found in the gospel. His life wasn't taken from Him by those who crucified Him, and this in no

way alleviates them from responsibility for the horrors they committed against Jesus. With all their weapons and all their evil plots they couldn't stand against the Lord for a moment. In Gethsemane Jesus laid them down flat on the ground with but a word self-identification. He laid down His life for us. For US. Were we worth this sacrifice?

Paul speaks to that in his epistle to the Romans.

Romans 5:6-8 "For when we were still without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly. ⁷ For scarcely for a righteous man will one die; yet perhaps for a good man someone would even dare to die. ⁸ But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us."

Christ died for the ungodly. Christ died for the UNGODLY! Yes, people have died for others. We hear accounts of heroic acts in battle, or from disasters like hurricanes or earthquakes. We hear of people doing things to save people that were important, like taking a bullet for the President, or people they admired, or people who had dedicated themselves to them or others. We hear of people not realizing the risk they were taking when they reached out to save others from peril. Jesus knew exactly what lay before Him, and He knew exactly what kind of bad actors we were, and "*He laid down His life for us.*"

It wasn't a deal that Jesus was making, "For those of you out in the world who make a concerted effort to be better people and try to make this world a better place, I will lay down my life for you." or "For those of you who manage somehow to stop sinning, I will lay down my life for you." No! That is a false narrative, a corrupted gospel that many would present to the world. It is not how it was. *While we were still sinners Christ died for us.* Jesus laid down His life, the holy precious life of the Son of God for us, a bunch of lowlife scoundrels. That was the sacrifice Jesus made for us.

This is love. This is the love of God in Christ Jesus for you. This sacrifice is powerful to save. This love is a power in our hearts and lives.

We started out this morning's meditation talking about the kind of response our Lenten meditations incite within us. John doesn't talk about us feeling sad, and shedding tears. He doesn't encourage only words, but he does talk about love and ties it to sacrifice.

II. Our Sacrifice - Laying Down our Lives for the Brethren

1 John 3:16-18 "By this we know love, because He laid down His life for us. And we also ought to lay down *our* lives for the brethren. ¹⁷ But whoever has this world's goods, and sees his brother in need, and shuts up his heart from him, how does the love of God abide in him? ¹⁸ My little children, let us not love in word or in tongue, but in deed and in truth.

Consider all John says here by inspiration of the Holy Spirit. As we read the sentence in its entirety we understand that John isn't calling for us to end our physical lives so that others might be saved. While I'm not saying that may be completely out of the question, there may be extreme circumstances when this may happen in one or another Christian's life. It would be rare. The Spirit doesn't want our response to Jesus' sacrifice for us to be the rare exceptional act of heroism. It is to be our manner of life.

This is the lesson Jesus was teaching the disciples on what we call Maundy Thursday in the Upper Room at the Last Passover Supper. The disciples had revived that bad argument about which of them was the greatest of Jesus' disciples. What do we see in Jesus? Jesus gets up from the couch where He was reclining at table, takes off His outer garment and wraps a towel around His waist. He then

takes a basin of water and starts washing His disciples' feet, the lowliest of household tasks, washing the road grime off their feet. *"The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many."* (Matthew 20:28) That is what Jesus had told them earlier that same week when they were having the same egotistical discussion. By washing their feet Jesus showed them the depth of His love in humble service. When He had finished washing their feet Jesus said:

John 13:12-17 "Do you know what I have done to you? ¹³You call Me Teacher and Lord, and you say well, for so I am. ¹⁴If I then, *your* Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. ¹⁵For I have given you an example, that you should do as I have done to you. ¹⁶Most assuredly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master; nor is he who is sent greater than he who sent him. ¹⁷If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them."

Think about that question Jesus asked the disciples. Think about it for yourself. Jesus asks, *"Do you know what I have done to you?"* How do you answer? Yes Lord, You washed away my sins. You redeemed me with Your holy precious blood. You saved my life by laying down Your life, by sacrificing Your life. You washed away my sins and made me clean.

In our text John is laying it out for you just as Jesus did for the disciples in the upper room. Jesus has given us an example that we should do as He did to us. In the greatness of His love for us *"He laid down His life for us, and we also ought to lay down our lives for the brethren."* (v.16) John makes sure that we understand this means in a daily, practical way. He says if we possess the necessities of life, if we possess worldly goods and we see a brother in need, and all we do is say, "so sad, too bad," and carry on, we are not truly comprehending the love Christ poured out for us when He laid down His life to save ours. John exhorts us not to love merely with our words, but in deed

and in truth. Jesus loved us, and acted to save us. We see our brother in distress, let us love and act, even sacrificially. This is why the Lord has blessed us with all the material bounty we have, so that we are able to follow Jesus' example of love and sacrifice and thereby glorify His name before the world.

Now in this Lenten season Christians are to give thought to the sacrifice Jesus made for us, and respond appropriately. Some respond with tears, and penitential tears may well indeed be seen as appropriate by our Lord. Others respond by sacrificing one of their favorite things, giving up candy for a few weeks, or meat on Fridays. Doesn't that seem rather superficial when one thinks about Jesus laying down His life for us? May the Lord who presents us with ample opportunities also give us a heart of love that we glorify Him by laying down our lives for the brethren.

AMEN.

And the peace of God which passes all understanding shall keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.