

No Greater Love  
John 15: 12-17  
May 28, 2017

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This is an important time in the life of a great church and I'm grateful for the privilege of being part of it. Thank you for inviting me to be with you for a few Sundays a month this summer. You know, a minister retired after years of getting up on Sunday morning and heading to work is a little bit lost on Sunday morning so my wife Sue thanks you as well.

Over the years I have had enormous respect for the First Presbyterian Church of Lake Forest for your distinguished witness in this community, your leadership in the Chicago Presbytery and in the Presbyterian Church USA. I have been friends and colleagues with your ministers and with your pastors. So this is a very happy development for me and I do thank you for it. Let us pray.

Startle us, O God, with your truth and open hearts and minds this morning so that hearing your Word we might believe and believing, trust you with our lives, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

The New Testament lesson this morning is from the Gospel of St. John, the 15<sup>th</sup> chapter. This material is from the last supper. Jesus is with his disciples and these are final words, sometimes called farewell discourses. Let us hear now the lesson beginning with verse 12 in chapter 15. This is my commandment. That you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer because a servant does not know what the master is doing. But I have called you friends because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my father. You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit – fruit that will last so that the father will give you

whatever you ask in my name. I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another. This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

On my desk I keep a framed picture of a United States Marine. He's in his uniform with a winsome smile on his face. His name was John Calvin McCormick – how about that for Presbyterian credentials. He was my mother's younger brother. I'm named for him. He was John Calvin McCormick. I am John McCormick Buchanan. He was killed during the Second World War on the island of Saipan in 1944, July. He was just 24 years old. I see his picture every day and I am reminded of him, reminded that young Americans have died for our country throughout our entire history. Some died today. No greater love, Jesus said, than to lay down one's life for one's friends.

I'm reading currently a book by the title of, *With the Old Breed*, a recently republished account of the World War 2 battles in the South Pacific islands of Peleliu and Okinawa by a Marine who was in the thick of it. His name was E.B. Sledge. A New York Times review about a month ago said that readers of military history regard this book as a classic, one of the most important accounts of war ever written. The author was a kind, decent, courageous, thoughtful, loyal truth teller. The Times said that his book is a reminder, a needed reminder all the time, of the great sacrifices others made to allow us to live the life we live.

The book is not for the faint of heart. I am not particularly recommending that you go out and buy it. Parts are brutally violent, parts are beautiful and inspiring. It eloquently and simply reinforces the words Jesus said, that no one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends.

Men fight, and women fight and die for moral issues, for moral values, for liberty, for security, for decency and democracy, for a way of life that honors all people, for freedom of speech and religion and assembly. But at the heart

of it is that men and women die for friends, for love of friends, buddies, for the company, the platoon.

Between horrific battles Sledge is ordered to report to company headquarters for an interview for Officer Candidate School (OCS) back in the United States. Instead of the possibility of a desk job instead of the horrors of these battles and the very real possibility of being killed . The casualty rate in some of those battles was close to 80%. At the end of this interview, remarkably, he declines the offer and reflects, “I really had no desire to leave Company K. It was home to me now. I had strong feelings of belonging to the Company no matter how miserable or dangerous conditions might be

On the last night of his life, Jesus said, “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.” He was with his dearest friends at dinner together, their last supper. He knew, I think, and they knew that the end was near. The opposition to him in Jerusalem had begun on the first day of that week when he entered the city in the midst of tumultuous welcome....people crowding the streets as he rode through the city gates, calling out Hosanna, waving palm branches.

Opposition to him, which had been churning for some time, now included religious officials who alerted the Roman authorities to the threat of insurrection. This man was not only disturbing the peace, coming into the city in this way, he was challenging the political status quo. Jesus could have avoided the whole nasty business by slipping out of the city under the cover of darkness that night, returning to a safe and comfortable life in Galilee.

If he stayed, he was going to be arrested and executed. And the very fact that he chose not to escape – to sit there calmly, bravely, eating and drinking with friends, deeply determined and committed to what was happening around him and deciding to be in charge of his own destiny, not a victim. The fact that he chose to spend the last day of his life breaking bread and sharing a cup of wine with his dearest friends, punctuates the drama and the importance of this

occasion. So we lean in and listen carefully as he says, “If you love me you will keep my commandments. I have a new commandment for you – love one another as I have loved you.” And then I see him pausing and looking into the face of each one of them and saying, “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.”

That is what he did. He wanted them to know why he did it because he loved them and he wanted them to know that God loved them so much that God would lay down life for them. He wanted them to live in that love when he was gone. He wanted them to live the rest of their days loving God, loving life, loving their families and friends enough to die for that love. He wanted them to know this truth. That until you love that deeply, that profoundly, you are not as fully and truly alive as God created you to be.

Near the end of his own life, John, the Gospel writer, wrote three little letters. The first of which he said the most remarkable thing. He wrote, God is Love. Not that God is Creator, God is judge, God is all powerful, God is omnipotent and omniscient. But he said, God is love.

Those are remarkable words. Beloved, let us love one another old John wrote, perhaps recalling that night at supper with him years before. Beloved, let us love one another because love is from God; God is love and those who abide in love abide in God and God abides in them. It is the essence of God. It is the essence of our humanity to love.

The late Donald Macleod taught a generation of Presbyterian ministers at Princeton Theological Seminary. Even though I did not attend that school, he reached out to me when I came to Chicago. We stayed in touch over the years until he died. Donald used to tell a story about a class he was teaching in the 1950s, a long time ago.

One of his students was a Chinese young man, a refugee who had escaped religious persecution. He left his family and home to come to the United

States. It was Donald's custom to ask one of the students to pray at the beginning of each class. The prayers, he told me, were usually innocuous simple. The Chinese student startled everyone one day, by praying, "O God, give us something to die for; for if we do not have something to die for, we have nothing for which to live.

That idea runs through Christianity, from the beginning up to and including our own life time. Christians started dying for their faiths shortly after Jesus' crucifixion. Twenty two Egyptian Christians died just last week. Martyrdom is part of who we are.

You know, I assume, the story of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, German pastor and theologian pacifist. At the urging of friends at Union Theological Seminary in New York City, including the great American theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, Bonhoeffer came to this country in the early 1930s to study and to work and to escape what was happening in his country with the rise of Nazism. Earlier he had written, "When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die." He meant that metaphorically in 1933, that to be a Christian you have to give your life away. But, as national Socialism tightened its grip on the German culture and German government, those words took on new and existential meaning.

Bonhoeffer decided that he simply could not sit out and watch what was happening in his native land from the safety and security of New York City. So he booked passage on one of the last boats to sail to Germany. When even his German church, that he loved so much, capitulated and became part of the government apparatus of the Third Reich, Bonhoeffer and his friends organized an underground church, a secret church. They called it the Confessing Church of Germany. That church, Bonhoeffer's colleagues, wrote a confession called the Barmen Confession. It's part of our Presbyterian Book of Confessions. It is a statement of faith that is critical of authoritarianism, specifically Naziism and affirms ultimate allegiance to no one – not the state,

not the government, not the party, not the Fuhrer; no authority other than Jesus Christ.

You know it is the essence of every kind of totalitarianism to demand that ultimate allegiance for itself. So, Confession Church ministers when this statement got out, Confessing Church ministers were arrested and tortured and executed. As the Nazi grip on German political structures tightened and as it became clear that the extermination of entire Jewish populations was planned and beginning to be carried out, Bonhoeffer made the fateful decision that it was his faithful Christian responsibility to resist. So he joined the resistance and ultimately was part of an attempt to assassinate Adolf Hitler. The plot almost succeeded but ultimately failed. Conspirators were identified, arrested. Literally two weeks before the German surrender, Dietrich Bonhoeffer was executed. Years before he had written, “Who stands fast? Only the one who is ready to sacrifice all when called to obedient and faithful action.”

There’s a powerful idea running through Christianity, through the life of Jesus that comes to fruition the night before he died; the night when he said, “No one has greater love than this – to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.”

Distinguished New Testament scholar, Raymond Brown, the authority on the Gospel of John said that the deeper you go into this text, the more the words life and love become interchangeable. One of the great, distinguishing characteristics of Christianity is here, he said, in the example of volunteering giving life away.

As he faced his own death, Jesus wanted his followers seated around that table, but also you and me, to know that the whole creation is full of love – God’s love. But he himself, his life, his teaching, supremely his death – all of it is an expression of love, of divine love. That the human race, with all its amazing diversity is the expression of God’s love. That all the religious traditions and rituals and theologies and institutions in the world are for the purpose of acknowledging and saying thank you for that love. And then

pouring that love back into the world, back into the life of our communities, our families, our churches, our lives.

And one thing more, one very personal thing. If you want to live your life fully, every year of it, every month and day and minute of it, you have to lay it down, you have to give it away, you have to find someone, something you love so much you are willing to live for and if necessary die for it.

At no point is this faith of ours more countercultural than right here. This is not about getting what you want, this is not about winning, this is not about being great again. This is about giving, giving your life, your love away. That's our secret, the Christian secret. To live the very best life you possibly can, you have to give it away... to a child, a beloved, your friends, your church, the great ideals and values of our nation. And so we remember all of them on this day.

In 1996 it was my privilege to represent the Presbyterian Church USA to its mission partners and personnel overseas. I was sent to Hawaii in December, tough duty, to visit there with Presbyterian military chaplains. I did that and it was a wonderful experience. While there one day, our host, the head of naval chaplains, asked if we wanted to visit and see the Punchbowl, a military cemetery in the bowl of an extinct volcano. It is a beautiful place. He explained that after the war many of our dead were brought there and reburied.

So I told him about my Uncle Jack and wondered if he might be there. I didn't know. So we went to the office and looked alphabetically and there he was. So we drove to the grave and I stood in front of it – PFC John C McCormick. I don't know if anybody in my family knew that. I had never heard it. They were all gone by then. I'm sure no one visited. So I can't be there to place a flower or flag on his grave but I remember him. May we all remember the one who taught us, and continues to teach us. The one who said, "No one has greater love than this – than to lay down one's life for one's friends." Thanks be to God. Amen.