

# Love as Christ Loved You

Easter 6 b  
John 15:9-17

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"No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends." That's quite a description of love -- especially when our Lord means it as a definition of discipleship.

It's an admirable thought, though, isn't it? Who doesn't admire that incomparable love of the hero laying down his life for others? Sacrificial love. Love at its highest and best. It evokes our admiration and wonderment.

I remember reading one time of a car that slid off an icy road near Philadelphia and plunged into a river. The man driving the car was able to get the three young boys with him out of the window and into the water where they were spotted and rescued by a passerby. The man, however -- the father of two of the boys -- couldn't get himself out. He drowned. But he died a hero.

I also remember the story of a toddler in Midland, Texas who had fallen down a narrow well shaft some years back. The story captured all the news cycles for about two days across the nation.\* Eventually a paramedic went down that narrow shaft, risking his own life, to save the trapped little girl. He was hailed as a hero by the press and the baby's parents. He said he didn't really think of it as all that much. But he was indeed a hero.

Such heroes and heroines thrill us and make us deeply appreciative of those who offer the last full measure of devotion -- namely their own lives -- to save another.

I don't know about you, but I hear stories like this, and I wonder if I could ever love that much. I guess I can understand a father or mother dying in an effort to protect a child. Maybe there's a certain instinct that takes over here. But with regard to friends -- Jesus said friends: "No one has greater love than to lay down one's life for one's FRIENDS." With regard to friends or strangers, boy I don't know.

I remember when I was growing up, I used to hear stories of the saints and martyrs, and how their faith would lead them into offering their own life to the Lord. Like St. Peter, who died upside-down on a cross. And St. Paul, who was beheaded by the Romans. And all those early Christian martyrs who chose to be fed to the lions rather than give up their faith. So many stories of martyrdom for the faith in so many centuries. Thomas Becket, hacked to death at his own altar while leading Vespers in Canterbury Cathedral. Joan of Arc, denounced as a witch and burned at the stake in Paris.

I used to hear those stories and wonder, "Could I ever really do that?" And I would hope that my faith NEVER got tested. I mean, we're talking about life and death here! We're not just talking about sacrifices like dropping a couple of coins in the

Salvation Army bucket or giving up chocolate for Lent or even giving food to the Food Pantry or things like that. We're talking about life and death!

So was Jesus, but I wonder if his emphasis wasn't a bit different. His emphasis was on love -- greater love. "Love one another as I have loved you."

I read an article once that suggested that people could be rated on a scale of love. And then they can know how they're doing in following Christ's command to love. See what you think.

The first step on the scale was ZERO LOVE. These are people who evidence little or no love. Totally self-centered, greedy, cruel people, who think nothing of murdering or maiming.

The next step was those who occasionally FEEL love but are reluctant to do anything about their feelings. These people don't express love in word or action. They are not so much self-centered as self-protective. They don't get involved, and they try not to get hurt. They're reclusive.

The next step was those who SPEAK love, but don't show it. There's a story in scripture that describes these people. They are the ones who cry, "Lord, Lord," but don't want to do what the Lord bids them. These people talk the talk of love, but do not walk the walk of love.

Then there's the people who SHOW love by giving of their resources. This step might also be called remote-controlled love. These are people who give their money or goods to needy people and causes, but that's the extent of it. They can write the check, but they're too busy to become involved.

After that step, there's those who ACT lovingly in totality. They feel love, speak love, give of their resources to show love and give of themselves as well. Sounds pretty good. How could you get any better than that?

And yet Christ would add the final step in this scale of love: "to lay down one's life for one's friends." He even puts it in the form of a commandment: "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you." And we all know that the way Christ loved was to lay down his life for his friends.

It's a heavy command. It's a heavy scale, and I'm not sure it gets us anywhere except feeling guilty maybe. But there is something in that heavy command that is pivotal here and takes the heaviness out to make the burden light.

It's precisely this point that Christ did indeed lay down his life for his friends. If it weren't for such love as this, we wouldn't know the perfection of love that comes from him.

The first letter of John makes this point clearly. "God IS love," it says in chapter four. But we don't know this except through the Son who came into the world. "In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins" (1 Jn.4:7,10).

This greatest love of sacrifice, of laying down one's life for one's friends, is the key to understanding all other love, all other sacrifice. Were it not for Christ, we would not know God's love, nor even where to begin with our own loving.

But there's more. God IS love, and God's kind of love has power. Our second lesson from 1 John 5 tells us this: "For the love of God is this, that we obey his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome, for whatever is born of

God conquers the world. And this is the victory that conquers the world, our faith” (1 Jn.5:3-4).

There it is. The power to forgive. The power to make new. The power to reach out and do things totally unexpected. And because of Christ and our baptism into Christ, God's love and the power of that love lives in us. And that means there's infinite possibility for our own loving.

It's not a question of how deep is your faith, or can I believe enough, or where do I fit on the scale. You are Christ's through your baptism. And Christ is God's. Therefore God's powerful love lives within you. How that love shows itself is not limited by your own abilities or inabilities – or even your adequate or inadequate faith. God's love lives in you and through you, making for infinite and powerful possibilities that blasts scales of love to pieces.

That man who saved the toddler trapped in the well shaft was quoted as saying that it wasn't so much something he thought about. He just did it. He didn't debate whether he could do it or not. He just did it. He didn't check his faith or his place on the scale. He just did it.

It's the same with all the saints and martyrs. They just did it. When the time came, they didn't stop to question whether their faith could carry them through. God's love was within them. And they just did it.

It's the same for us. It's not so much an OUGHT – I OUGHT to love or I OUGHT to be on a higher step in the scale or I OUGHT to believe more fully. It's not an OUGHT. We just do it.

And we do it because God's love is in us and makes it possible to do it. Christ's laying down of his life makes it possible for us to love one another as he loved us.

Don't limit yourself in your loving. Don't sell your faith short on false and misleading scales of loving. Instead open yourself up to the power and possibility of loving as Christ loved you.

\*Wikipedia: Rescue of Jessica McClure