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Elevate Others: Sacrifice

John 15:12-17; Romans 5:6

I went Costco-shopping the other day with old people. Apparently, I qualify. Anyone 60 or over could show up at 8:00 A.M. and they would have the place to themselves. I thought, "What the heck. I'm on the young end of the spectrum and I will DOMINATE those old people."

You know...there's a reason that generation won World War II! They were like an invasion force! All of them wearing their masks... which made them look even more intimidating. All you could see were their eyes... but those eyes said it all! They were fierce and frightening. With one look they said, "Don't even think about coming between me and my toilet paper!" Cyndi refused to join me because, as she put it, "I'm not old enough." Well, next time we're lying about her age because I'm not going back all by myself!

I'm teasing, of course. Kind of. But that "every man for himself" attitude kind of flies in the face of our theme for this sermon series: Elevate Others. In a season when it is easy to be selfish, scripture invites us to elevate others. And on this Memorial Day weekend it seemed appropriate to speak of the ultimate expression of selflessness: Sacrifice.

Have you heard the expression, "Johnny One Note?" It means a person who repeats the same thing over and over again. Well...the original Johnny One Note...might be... Johnny. John the Apostle. John, the Gospel writer. Of course, John had MANY things to say...but if you had to narrow down his message to one phrase, here it is: "Love one another."

NINE times Apostle Johnny One-Note repeats that phrase, both in the gospel and in his letters. Why don't you repeat it with me? ADD EACH PHRASE AS I REPEAT IT. Love one another. Love one another. Love one another. Love one another. Love one another. Love one another. Love one another. Love one another. Think he wanted to make a point? He repeated it over and over again... because... Jesus repeated it over and over again!

John 13 is the first time we hear these words from the Lord's lips. He called it his "New Commandment." "Love one another as I have loved you."

He repeats himself in chapter 15:12...but adds a kicker. See if you can spot it. This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends.... These things I command you, so that you will love one another.

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

So...did you spot the kicker? "...love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends..." Sacrifice! Self-sacrifice. We elevate others through sacrifice.

This whole section in John's gospel is known as "The Upper Room Discourse." On the night he would be arrested, Jesus knows he has one more shot at preparing his disciples for what lies ahead. And so, he pours on the coal.

And when Jesus said, "Greater love has no one than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends..." he was predicting what was just about to happen to him. Literally, Jesus WAS about to lay down his life for his friends; the eleven disciples who remained after Judas abandoned them. And in chapter 18, we see this prediction fulfilled.

So Judas, having procured a band of soldiers ...went [to Gethsemane] with lanterns and torches and weapons. Then Jesus...came forward and said to them, "Whom do you seek?" They answered him, "Jesus of Nazareth." Jesus said to them, "I am he." ...When Jesus said to them, "I am he," they drew back and fell to the ground. So he asked them again, "Whom do you seek?" And they said, "Jesus of Nazareth." Jesus answered, "I told you that I am he. So, if you seek me, let these men go."

It says something about the power of the presence of Jesus that when he said, "I Am he," ...the sheer force of his words knocked his assailants to the ground. Jesus didn't HAVE to allow himself to be arrested...but he did. He could have called on an army of angels to deliver him. But he did not. He ransomed himself for his disciples: "So...if you seek me, let these men go." Jesus laid down his life for his friends...literally.

But those words were intended for more than just those 11 men. He was speaking to us! When you read these words spoken 2000 years ago, remember...Jesus was talking to you! He was saying, "I love you. And I will prove it by laying down my life for you." What manner of sacrificial love is this! And many of Jesus' disciples have followed his example down through the centuries.

Auschwitz is the infamous concentration camp which was the site of the largest mass murder in human history. 1.1 million people were exterminated in Auschwitz by the Nazis. I want to talk about one man in a million. His name was Maximilian Kolbe.

In order to discourage escape attempts, the Nazis had a rule that if any prisoner tried to escape, ten more would die in the Starvation Bunker...which was exactly what it sounded like; a concrete room in which prisoners were denied both food and drink...and died a slow and agonizing death.

In July, 1941, someone DID escape. The remaining prisoners were lined up and the names of ten randomly-chosen men, called out. Francis Gajowniczek was one of them. And upon hearing his name, he cried out, "My poor wife. My poor children. What shall they do?" As he sobbed, a slight, bespectacled man stepped forward. His name was Maximilian Kolbe. He took off his cap and addressed the Commandant of the camp. "I am a Catholic priest. Let me take his place. I am old. He has a wife and children."

To everyone's astonishment, the Commandant agreed to the trade. Kolbe was thrown into Building 13 along with the other nine, and left to starve. But as the days passed, instead of the customary moans, the sounds of singing and prayers could be heard as Kolbe led his doomed cellmates in worship. One by one, they died. But after two weeks, the guards grew impatient because they needed to torture other prisoners in that bunker. Kolbe was the last man standing and, when his executioner entered to give him a lethal injection of carbolic acid... Kolbe extended his arm to his killer.

Gajowniczek, the man whom Kolbe ransomed, later said of that moment, "I could only thank him with my eyes. I was stunned and could hardly grasp what was going on. The immensity of it: I, the condemned, am to live and someone else willingly and voluntarily offers his life for me—a stranger...I was saved."

For those of us who have never faced the horrors of war, stories like this are hard to comprehend. And because we live in a time of relative peace, these heroic heights of human love can seem unattainable. Who among us is going to be asked to lay down his life for another? Probably not. And honestly...how can we know whether we would? We hope we would be heroic in the moment...but do we ever really know?

And yet...for the first time in my life...non-military people around the world are being asked to do exactly that. When I think of first responders, our health care workers and those who continue to provide essential services to us.... all at risk to themselves ...aren't they demonstrating the sacrificial love of which Jesus spoke?

The International Council of Nurses estimates that 90,000 healthcare workers have become infected with Corona. A website MedScape maintains a growing list of the names of more than 1000 medical personnel who have died so far. You can find similar on-line memorials to police officers, firefighters and other emergency service providers who have died of COVID-19.

Memorial Day is ordinarily about acknowledging the supreme sacrifice made by those in uniform. But I doubt our veterans will mind if today, we also acknowledge these warriors in a different kind of battle, who are loving us by laying down their lives in service to us.

But...what ABOUT the majority of us who are NOT serving on the front lines? For us, are these inspiring words of Jesus' irrelevant? I don't think so. There are ways we can lay down our lives

that may not require us to lose our lives. Ways we can lay down self-interest, comfort, security, fear...

I think of a man in our LifeGroup. His daughter just bore him a granddaughter. He longs to hold and kiss that baby, but he has to work. So, he offered his wife in his stead. She went into quarantine for two weeks...which meant they could not share their bed. And now, his wife is living with their daughter's family, serving and loving them...and kissing that baby...something my friend longs to do but cannot...yet. He has laid down his ordinary life in this moment for the sake of his family. Doesn't that count?

I know of a Christian woman who works for a paint company. A month ago, that company gave a box of N-95 masks to every employee. She turned around and gave the entire box to a friend, a nurse who works at TG. Doesn't that count?

Or what about the volunteers who serve our local Food Bank? Nearly all these people fall in the at-risk category, age-wise...and yet they continue to serve the poor in perhaps their greatest time of need. Doesn't that count?

Stories like this are being repeated every day, around the world. Stories of selfless love and sacrifice. Stories of courage. Stories that inspire. Stories that stand in contrast, frankly, to other stories we are beginning hearing. Like the city in our state with a web site that encourages its citizens to report on each other... anonymously. Or the woman in downtown Gig Harbor who was taking pictures of my wife when she stopped to greet friends in the park. I find that chilling. That "informant culture" reminds me of what I experienced when I visited Communist East Berlin in 1985. It is not a culture that elevates others. It is a culture that cultivates suspicion...and fear. Fear of neighbor. Fear of betrayal. Fear of disease. Fear of death.

But we Christians...shouldn't we have a leg-up on this culture of fear? We are people of the Empty Tomb. Isn't that what we just celebrated on Easter? We have a savior who not only laid down his life for his friends...he was raised BACK to life for his friends. And he promised that same life to every person who trusts him. Jesus said, "I am the Resurrection and the Life. He who believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live. And whoever lives and believes in me shall never die."

Do you remember when he spoke those words? Just before he raised his friend Lazarus from the dead. Say them with me. "...he who believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live." Jesus spoke them to Martha, the sister of Lazarus. And do you remember his very next words? "Do you believe this?" "...whoever lives and believes in me shall never die. Do ...you ...believe ...this?" This is the same question Jesus asks today. Do you believe that, for the followers of Jesus, life has the last word? And if so...are you living and walking and speaking in faith?

I am NOT saying we ought to be reckless. We SHOULD take reasonable precautions to protect others as well as ourselves. Our actions as a church bear that out. But I am saying that

precaution can morph into paranoia. And that instinct is unworthy of anyone who follows the risen Christ.

Our daughter Rachel is essentially, the pastor of Montreat College in North Carolina. As we discussed how she is ministering to her campus in this season, at one point she blurted out, "I am not afraid of death." Of course, this comes from the girl who rides a motorcycle, sky dives and bungee-jumped from the tallest bridge in the world. So no surprise, there. But shouldn't that be the mantra of every Christian? I am not afraid of death!

Paul said this the Corinthians. "Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?...thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ."

To the Romans, Paul wrote, "For if we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord. So then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's."

Do you see how this changes everything? If it is the case that no matter what, in life AND in death, we are in the firm grasp of Jesus, then ours is the ultimate win-win situation. And it ought to make it EASIER for us Christians to lay down our lives for our friends.

For the person who doesn't believe in Christ...who has no hope of a life after this one... it is an extraordinary act of bravery to offer up one's life. You have nothing left. But if you know that, no matter what ...whether you catch the virus or not... whether you are asymptomatic or stricken ... whether you survive this plague or it takes your life...that regardless, you are the Lord's...then that...changes...everything. Doesn't it?

So...I'll ask the same question again: Do you believe this? Do you believe Jesus when he says, "Don't be afraid. You belong to me. In life...and in death...you are mine." "Greater love has no one than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends."

I want to remind you of a quote I shared back at the beginning of this outbreak. It was 1527. Bubonic plague had struck Wittenberg, Germany. Martin Luther remained behind to care for the sick and wrote a treatise urging Christian leaders to do the same. And in it, he trash-talked the Devil...one of his favorite things to do.

"No, [devil], you'll not have the last word! If Christ shed his blood for me and died for me, why should I not expose myself to some small dangers for his sake and disregard this feeble plague? If you can terrorize, Christ can strengthen me. If you can kill, Christ can give life. If you have poison in your fangs, Christ has far greater medicine. Should not my dear Christ...be more important in my spirit than you, roguish devil, with your false terrors in my weak flesh? God forbid! Get away, devil. Here is Christ and here am I, his servant in this work. Let Christ prevail! Amen."