

Rev. Lynne Ogren Zion Lutheran Church
May 6, 2018 6th Sunday of Easter, Year B John 15:9-17

This is the day that the Lord has made! Let us rejoice and be glad in it! Amen

In last Sunday's sermon I mentioned a study that said that many pastors say true generosity is always or often sacrificial. When I read that I had a problem with the word sacrificial or sacrifice. I don't believe God calls us to give until it hurts. And yet, anything we give, whether it is time, talent or treasure, is a sacrifice on our part. We let go of something that once was ours and we sacrifice it for the benefit of another.

The word sacrifice begins with the same root word as sacred or holy. To give of one's self is a holy thing. In our gospel reading today Jesus is preparing his disciples for his sacrifice, his death on the cross. This passage is part of what is known as his farewell discourse that follows Jesus' last meal with his disciples. Here Jesus repeats the command he gave when he washed their feet, "love one another as I have loved you."

Then he goes on to tell what that kind of love looks like. "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends." Of course, we think of Jesus laying down his life by his death on the cross. In our world, military personnel, law enforcement, and first responders sign up for the possibility of putting their lives on the line for others.

But laying down our life for someone else doesn't always mean physically dying. It means sacrificing something of ourselves for the gift and benefit of another person. And as Jesus' friends, our giving is always a sacred act when it is lived out of abiding in the love of Jesus.

When we think of our own sacrificial giving—or that which we have received from others—we might think of those who give up a job or move in order to take care of an ailing parent or family member. Some make the choice to give up on a career path for the sake of their children.

Often, sacrificial giving is as simple as setting aside our opinion in order to learn a new perspective from someone else. But maybe that's not as simple as it sounds.

We also give of our skills or talents when we cook a meal for someone or tutor someone in our subject area. Teaching and mentoring others is a sacrifice of time and the gift of experience. I'm sure you can think of a number of ways that you have received this kind of giving from someone or done it yourself.

Zion Lutheran is a financially generous congregation and you continue to give both to the life of this faith community and to outside organizations. Giving our money is a sacrificial, holy act, especially when we see that gift as a means to extend the work of God's care and healing into the world.

In the part of John's gospel we heard today, Jesus' words to love as he has loved follow that last meal he shared with his disciples. In the washing of their feet Jesus loved Peter, the one he knew would turn his back on him. He loved Judas, the one who handed him over to the authorities.

Loving as Jesus loves impacts our generosity toward those we have loving feelings for, and it also calls us to love those who bring up less than loving feelings.

Today we will commission our first Stephen Ministers. I don't want set these folks on a pedestal, but they do give us a good example of what it means to lay down our lives for others.

They have given of their time, having spent 50 hours in training over the past four months in addition to reading the materials in preparation for each week. And they are committed to serve as Stephen Ministers for at least two years.

Stephen Ministers will give their attention and their hearts to the needs of another person, in many cases it will be someone they have not met before.

These folks are laying down the natural human response to try to fix someone. Instead they will give their attention to that person's needs and feelings to help them find ways to move through their challenging season. In Stephen Ministry we hear again and again that we are the care givers and God is the cure giver.

I could go on, but I think you see how Stephen Ministry is an example of what Christian friendship is all about. We are not all called to lay down our lives in this particular way, but we are commanded by Jesus to live in ways that lay down our needs and desires in order build up and bring life other people.

Living under Christ's command to love one another as he has loved us is a sacrificial kind of loving. It is a holy way of living, and holy living is not something we come to do or be on our own. In baptism we were made holy by the gift and power of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit empowers us to lay down our lives in love for our sisters and brothers.

And we have this promise in Jesus' words, "You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last."

We don't always know how the time or money or attention we give to others will last or how it will impact someone's life. We trust in the power of the Spirit to make our acts of love holy so that through them God will bring new life to others—in God's way and in God's time.

Jesus calls us his friends, and we extend that friendship with all of God's children. As we learn to lay down our lives in care for one another, that same love is carried into the world.

May God bless us to love one another and to serve in the name of Jesus wherever we go.
Amen