

## LAYING DOWN ONE'S LIFE FOR FRIENDS

A sermon by Dean Scotty McLennan  
Stanford Memorial Church  
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"Love one another,"<sup>ii</sup> says Jesus, and "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends."<sup>iii</sup> These statements are part of Jesus' final commandments to his disciples on the night he was to be arrested and taken away to be crucified. So clearly we need to read into this passage Jesus' own sacrifice -- his own love for his disciples, and indeed for all of humanity, for which he was willing to lay down his own life. Yet, he also makes clear that these words are meant for his followers, and by extension for us here today: "I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete. This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you."<sup>iiii</sup>

This is pretty stiff instruction. We're each asked by Jesus to be willing to lay down our lives for our friends. And it sounds as if that means anytime, and all the time.

I have a close friend, whom I've known since college, who's unambiguous on giving up his life for me. He'd never do. And, he says, he'd never ask me to do it for him. This has been his position for decades, through a lot of thought and experience. We're each given life as a gift, he explains, and it's the most precious gift imaginable. It's our job to be the best possible stewards of that gift -- in terms of maintaining our health and finding as much joy and fulfillment as possible. If he were to quote scripture, he might quote Psalm 98, as Jennifer read earlier: "O sing to the Lord a new song, for he has done marvelous things...Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth; break forth into joyous song and sing praises." He would be quick to express his appreciation for his years on this earth, and it would make no sense knowingly and purposefully to cut those years short.

My friend might quote God's commandment from Deuteronomy: "I call heaven and earth to witness today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life, so that you and your descendants may live."<sup>iv</sup> He might even quote Jesus from earlier in the gospel of John, where he says "The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I have come that they may have life, and have it more abundantly."<sup>v</sup> My friend's basic position is that each of us should strive to maximize our own life experience and try to realize our own greatest potential. It would go without saying for him that personal maximizing and realization should never be at the expense of another. One should never hurt another in order to further oneself. Yet, that doesn't mean that you should consciously put another person ahead of yourself in terms of sacrificing the one and only life you've been given in this world.

Martin Luther King, Jr. took a very different perspective: "If a man hasn't discovered something he would die for, he isn't fit to live."<sup>vi</sup> "Not fit to live"? That sounds rather harsh for my friend. What I've always gained from King's perspective, though, is that it's precisely in being willing to give up one's life, that one's life -- while one is alive -- gains tangible meaning. I

operate on the assumption that I'd be willing to give up my own life in a heart's beat for either of my two children. My love for them is so powerful, so unconditional, so much like animal instinct. Having a sense of that also makes my life so much more valuable in the time that I am alive, before I'm put to that ultimate test. The quality of my life now, because of that willingness, lodged in my love for them, far outstrips some sense of quantity of life if I put my longevity ahead of theirs. Looking at it the other way around, if there was a clear choice between their life and mine, and I chose mine -- letting them die -- I can't imagine how I could continue living with myself. In fairness to my friend, now, I believe he would also put his two children's lives ahead of his own, although he'd claim he wouldn't for the sake of intellectual consistency. I know how deeply he loves them and I know what he's already been willing to sacrifice for them.

So much for parent and child. What about brothers and sisters? Here's a story I read on the internet: "When eight-year old Joey's little sister underwent a necessary operation, it turned out she had lost so much blood [that] she was in need of an immediate transfusion. Joey's blood was the same as his little sister's. 'Will you give your sister some of your blood?' asked the doctor. Joey paused for a long time before he agreed. The boy tried to be brave as the blood was being drawn from his veins, but the doctor noticed that he was growing paler and paler. When the draw was complete, Joey looked up at the doctor and timidly asked, 'I was just wondering how long it will be before I die?' The doctor looked down at Joey and said, 'Do you think people die when they give blood?' 'Well, yes sir," replied Joey. 'And you were willing to die for your sister?' 'Yes sir,' he said quietly."<sup>vii</sup>

Whew. "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends."<sup>viii</sup> In this case one's sister. Would this shame my friend that an eight year old would pause a long time before he agreed to give blood for his sister's transfusion, but then would do so on the assumption that he would die, so that his sister would live? Perhaps my friend would say that an eight year old hasn't really come to appreciate the full, unique value of his life yet. Or perhaps he'd say that an eight year old can't exercise good judgment yet, or that the boy felt pushed into his decision by strong, respected adults. Or perhaps my friend would say that the eight year old was recklessly brave, even as pale as he grew and as timidly as he spoke. Yet, the question remains of what happens to our moral vision and to our capacity for love as we grow older, if this eight year old was willing to make the ultimate sacrifice for his sister and we older people are able to analyze away his willingness through a variety of intellectual rationalizations.

Yet, this is still an example of one's own flesh and blood, like me and my children. What about a mere friend? When I was about Joey's age, I was very moved by the classic story of Damon and Pythias, said to have taken place in the Sicilian city-state of Syracuse in the fourth century B.C.<sup>ix</sup> As I'm sure many of you remember, these two men had been close friends since childhood. Pythias spoke out against the tyranny of the ruler, Dionysius, and was subsequently arrested and condemned to death. As a last request he asked if he might be allowed to go back home to say goodbye to his wife and children and to put his household in order before his execution. Dionysius was not willing to risk Pythias' fleeing, until Damon stepped forward and offered to pledge his own life and be imprisoned until Pythias returned. The condition that Dionysius imposed was that Damon must be willing to die in his place if Pythias did not return

by the date of execution. Damon willingly agreed and Pythias gratefully left.

As days and days went by, and the deadline approached, and there was no sign of Pythias, Dionysius visited the prison to see if Damon was sorry he had made such a bargain: "You were a fool to rely on your friend's promise. Did you really think he would sacrifice his life for you?" Yet, Damon remained confident of his friend's loyalty, explaining that perhaps the winds had kept him from sailing or he had met with some accident on the road. On the day of execution, Pythias still had not returned, and Dionysius smugly greeted Damon, who was bound and ready to die. "What do you think of your friend now?" asked the ruler. Damon simply replied, "He is my friend. I trust [that he has good reasons not to be here, and I am ready to die in his place]."

Just as he finished speaking, Pythias suddenly appeared, staggering, beaten and bruised, and nearly speechless from exhaustion. "[Thank heaven I'm not too late!] You are safe, [Damon,] praise the gods," he gasped. Pythias then explained how his ship was wrecked in a storm and how he was then attacked by bandits on the road. "But I refused to give up hope," he declared. "At last I've made it back in time. I am ready to receive my sentence of death."

Dionysius was utterly astonished. He was so emotionally overwhelmed by this demonstration of friendship -- in both directions -- that he revoked the sentence and let both go free, asking only that he could be taught how to be such a friend. "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friend."<sup>x</sup>

Understanding friendship as Damon and Pythias did would presumably be enough for any of us. Yet, Martin Luther King, Jr. took it a step further, in the spirit of Jesus' injunction not only to love one's friends, and one's neighbors, but also to love one's enemies. As Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount, "Love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you."<sup>xi</sup> In his final sermon,<sup>xii</sup> the night before he was assassinated, Martin Luther King said that he knew he was personally facing death threats "from some of our sick white brothers" if he continued leading marches in Memphis, Tennessee, in support of striking sanitation workers. Yet, he said, "Now we're going to march again, and we've got to march again, in order to... force everybody to see that there are thirteen hundred of God's children here suffering, sometimes going hungry, going through dark and dreary nights... For when people get caught up with that which is right, and they are willing to sacrifice for it, there is no stopping point short of victory."

Dr. King explained, "Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will." He spoke of the power of non-violent action, grounded in love. He spoke of previously being jailed with others in Bull Connor's Birmingham. "We'd see the jailers looking through the windows being moved by our prayers, and being moved by our words and our songs. And there was a power there which Bull Connor couldn't adjust to; and so we ended up transforming Bull into a steer, and we won our struggle in Birmingham."

Dr. King in his final sermon called upon his listeners to "develop a kind of dangerous unselfishness." He retold the Parable of the Good Samaritan,<sup>xiii</sup> reminding those attending how dangerous the road was down from Jerusalem to Jericho, called the "Bloody Pass." It was a man of another race and religion, hated by the Jews, with no reason to put himself at risk for his persecutors, who stopped for the beaten and bloody traveler on the side of the road, when that

traveler's fellow Jewish priest and fellow Levite had already passed by. As Dr. King pointed out, the Samaritan didn't even know if the robbers were still around, or if the man on the ground was merely faking, in order to lure the Samaritan over for a quick and easy seizure. Yet, the Samaritan engaged in "dangerous unselfishness," showing love for a fellow human being who was not his flesh and blood, was not his friend, was not even of his own race and religion.

And this is the kind of love, "dangerous unselfishness" that Martin Luther King, Jr. modelled for us, even unto death -- which for him arrived in the form of a bullet from one of those "sick white brothers" the very morning after this stirring sermon.

Jesus in this morning's gospel lesson promises that "if you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love."<sup>xiv</sup> This is my commandment," he says, "that you love one another as I have loved you." And then he tells us what that love ultimately requires: "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends." May each of us be ready when that time comes for us. AMEN.

## NOTES

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- i. John 15: 17.
  - ii. John 15: 13.
  - iii. John 15: 11-12.
  - iv. Deuteronomy 30: 19.
  - v. John 10: 10.
  - vi. "Success: Key Quotes" at [www.successkey.com/keyquotesindex.htm](http://www.successkey.com/keyquotesindex.htm)
  - vii. "Love, Hate, and Friendship," at <http://members.tripod.com/pranita/quotes/lovehate.htm>
  - viii. John 15: 13.
  - ix. I am using the version of the story of Damon and Pythias recorded in William J. Bennett, The Book of Virtues (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993), pp. 306-308.
  - x. John 15: 13.
  - xi. Matthew 5: 44.
  - xii. Martin Luther King, Jr., "I See the Promised Land," a sermon delivered at the Bishop Charles Mason Temple in Memphis on April 3, 1968. As reproduced in James M. Washington (ed.), Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings of Martin Luther King, Jr. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986), pp. 279-286.
  - xiii. See Luke 10: 30-37.
  - xiv. John 15: 10.