

To Lay Down One's Life

John 15:9-17

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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I have a folder on my computer called “Ceremonies.” In it, I have three main sub-folders: “Baptisms,” “Weddings,” and “Funerals.”

Anyone want to take a wild guess which is the largest of those three files?

Yes, of course it's “funerals.” “Weddings” and “baptisms” aren't even close.

I confess that there have been times during my ministry where the size of these folders has been a source of anxiety, even shame for me. I have felt like I was failing. Failing as a pastor, failing the church, failing God.

A good pastor would have far more balanced folder sizes! Certainly, the baptism one be a little larger!

But then I have conversations with other pastors. And I read the news. And good and wise friends and colleagues and mentors remind me that I am hardly alone. The size of my folders reflects broad trends across the church and the culture, at least in the West.

Let's start with baptism. We live in a cultural moment where Christianity and the church, at least in the West, is said to be in decline. We know this story well.

Churches and denominations are aging and shrinking. We hear of the rise of the “nones” (not to be confused with nuns!)—those who check “none” on surveys asking them about their religious affiliation.

More than a quarter of Americans now identify as “nones” (I suspect the number would be slightly higher in Canada, if anything). That's a number that has almost doubled since 2007 (less than twenty years).

Of this group, the overwhelming majority don't claim to be atheists or even agnostics, they just say that they are "nothing in particular."

Fewer and fewer people are signing up for the life of faith. And even those who retain an interest in the church, often do so at a bit of a distance.

People are much more hesitant to commit. They want to keep their options open. Plenty of people find Jesus interesting, perhaps they even like the community offered by church.

But baptism is a big step. And maybe I don't want to be associated with the institutional church (it's done some bad things!). Maybe I'll just be vaguely "spiritual but not religious."

So, this at least partially explains the size of my "baptism" folder.

What about weddings? Well, again, fewer and fewer people are getting married. In 1980, 6 percent of 40-year-olds had never been married. Today, it's 25 percent.

Young people seem to find connecting harder and harder. Dating apps are, by many accounts, ruining dating, turning it into an online meat market.

Those who do find romantic partners increasingly just live together rather than tying the knot. Some think that marriage is antiquated or patriarchal or inherently oppressive.

This, even though the data overwhelmingly shows that married people report higher happiness and greater life satisfaction than single people or even people who cohabit.¹

(Funnily enough, I will be doing two weddings on back-to-back September Saturdays, which is two more than I have done in the last few years! One is my nephew and his girlfriend, the other one of Naomi's former co-workers. I'm excited about this.)

At any rate, this explains the size of my "weddings" folder.

¹ See, for example, https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2023/08/does-marriage-make-you-happier/675145/?utm_source=pocket_saves

But this isn't a sermon about marriage or baptism or even funerals. I bring all this up to talk about what I think is the deeper underlying cause of these broad cultural trends.

The deeper issue is the self and how we understand it.

We live in a time of what sociologists call the rise of "expressive individualism" as the dominant assumption or approach to life.

Alan Noble describes our cultural default like this in his book *You Are Not Your Own*:

To be your own and belong to yourself means that the most fundamental truth about existence is that you are responsible for your existence and everything it entails. I am responsible for living a life of purpose, of defining my identity, of interpreting meaningful events, of choosing my values, and electing where I belong... I am the only one who can set limits on who I am or what I can do. No one else has the right to define me, to choose my journey in life, or to assure me that I am okay. I belong to myself.²

I belong to myself. This is the mantra of our time, and it bleeds into all our decision making.

In our context, baptism can easily become more about our own spiritual journeys than about the One to whom we are pledging our lives.

Marriage can easily become about personal fulfillment rather than about committing ourselves to the well-being of someone else.

This week, I read about a college professor who decided to wake up a sleepy group of undergraduates one day by talking about marriage as a kind of "martyrdom," a dying to self.

The students' response was fascinating. I want to read a passage from the article:

"I think you should never be in a relationship where you have to do that!"

"Never have to do what, exactly?"

² Alan Noble, *You Are Not Your Own: Belonging to God in an Inhuman World* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2021), 3-4.

“Like, be expected to give up your life for someone else. Like, it’s your life. No one else has a right to ask for you to sacrifice yourself.”

The conversation went on from there, the class getting more and more animated, a polemic against the idea that marriage, or just long-term relationships in general, should involve the sacrifice of one’s ‘self’. **A spouse, they insisted, should be someone who affirms and celebrates everything that you are, and who supports you in whatever dreams or ambitions that you want chase. And children? Well, they should only be brought into the equation to fulfil your dreams, not to limit them.** Marriage is many things, but it should not be a sacrifice, less still a martyrdom.³

I’m not suggesting that once upon a time everyone entered marriage gloriously committed to all the right ideals and primed for self-sacrifice! But this struck me as such a perfect (and sad) encapsulation of the ethos of our time.

Institutions—marriage, baptism, parenting, church, politics, whatever—exist to serve me, not the other way around.

This is our world.

And this is the context in which we hear Jesus’ words from the fifteenth chapter of John’s gospel:

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.

To lay down one’s life. Could there be a more countercultural message in our time, I wonder?

The image on the cover of this week’s bulletin is of Jesus washing his disciples’ feet. Our text this morning takes place in the wider context of John 13-17, what scholars refer to as “the farewell discourse.” Jesus’ last words before he goes the way of the cross.

³ <https://www.seenandunseen.com/marriage-martyrdom-seriously>

Jesus has a lot to say to his disciples in these five chapters, but before he says a word, he bends over and washes their feet.

It is the posture of other before self, of service, even of submission. Of setting aside one's own reputation and desires and focusing on the good of the other.

When Jesus says, "Love one another as I have loved you" this is what the "as I have loved you" looks like.

This is the kind of love that defined Jesus' entire life and teaching and example.

So, is this just a sermon telling us to stop being so self-centred? A call to replace God at the centre instead of ourselves?

Should we all just roll up our sleeves and do our grim duty of loving our neighbours in sacrificial and costly ways in the hopes that we'll please God (or maybe add a few baptisms and weddings to our anxious pastors' files!)?

Well, yes. And no.

Yes, I think that we are in desperate need of placing God instead of ourselves at the centre, whether this is culturally or personally. I think more people *should* get baptized and more people *should* get married.

(I say this with all due sensitivity to those who are single and wish they weren't. I know that there are those who would desperately love to have a spouse or a partner and this is a source of deep pain).

Baptism and marriage and parenting and regular worship are important ways in which God can dislodge ourselves from the center of the story. That's not *all* they are. But it's an important part.

So, yes, we *should* be seeking to love in more selfless ways. But I don't think this is all grim duty. Not at all.

Jesus says two things in this passage that I think we tend to see as contradictory.

On the one hand, he says “Love is laying down your life.” On the other hand, he says “I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.”

Living and loving like Jesus is the path to a life of flourishing, fulfillment, even joy.

We find our truest selves and our deepest joy by giving our lives away. This seems counterintuitive, but it is the message that resounds from the pages of the New Testament. Jesus makes this explicit in Matthew 16:

²⁴ Then Jesus told his disciples, ‘If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. ²⁵ For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. ²⁶ For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life?

We cannot keep what we cling to.

And we might also look at how things are going with the self at the centre. Broadly speaking, it’s not going so well.

I don’t think I’m overstating it when I say that ours is a culture where we have never had more options at our disposal when it comes to cultivating and prioritizing and elevating the self. And what do we see?

Do we see joy in abundance? Do we see human flourishing?

Well, no. We see exploding levels of anxiety, depression, loneliness, addiction. We see disposable relationships and broken families. We see ugly polarizing discourse. We are not well.

And even aside from all this, our freedom to create ourselves is often experienced as a terrible burden.

Alan Noble, again:

But the freedom of sovereign individualism comes at a great price. Once I am liberated from all social, moral, natural, and religious values, I become responsible

for the meaning of my own life. **With no God to judge or justify me, I have to be my own judge and redeemer.**⁴

The church has a real opportunity to show a better and more hopeful way here.

We may not be able to instantly reverse all those trends that I began with, but we *can* bear witness to a better way. We can be faithful to the kind of love that God has called us to embody in the world.

I want to end where Jesus begins in today's passage. *Abide in my love.*

There is a lot of talk of following commands in this passage. Love as I have loved. Lay down your lives. Go bear fruit. Love one another.

Get busy! Right?

Well, again, yes. And no.

Yes, Jesus gives us an agenda. Yes, we are to *do* what he says. Yes, we are called to love as he did. And, yes, I am convinced that this self-denying love is one of the most desperately necessary antidotes for our troubled times.

But that word "abide" also points to a deeper truth. "Abide" is not a frantic, striving, earning word.

The range of meanings for the Greek word is interesting:

- to remain
- to not depart
- to continue to be present
- to be held, kept, continually
- to wait for

⁴ Noble, 4.

It means to anchor ourselves in the love of God. To settle in. To accept it as a settled fact about God and about the universe.

It means to make our home with God and with God's love in and for the world and to trust that this love will have the last word on our story and on every story.

Jesus didn't just show us what love looks like in his life. He showed it in his dying and his rising from the dead, too. He showed it in doing for us what we cannot do for ourselves.

This week, I heard the story of a church in New York that had been experiencing a bit of a bounce back after years of decline and stagnation.

Why? Well, some pointed to the arrival of a new pastor. It wasn't all him, but many said he was a big part of the change.

"What has he done?" came the obvious question. I'll let the writer of the article pick up the story from here:

"He can summarize the Bible's whole message in just seven words."

I had, of course, to ask. "And what are the seven words that summarize the entire Bible?"

He smiled and said, "I am God and you are not."

Honestly, I had expected something, well, friendlier, something more upbeat and inspiring, maybe a clarion call to action.

"I am God and you are not." It sounded a little abrupt, a little sharp. A bit like that after-shave commercial where the tonic has the effect of a brisk slap, after which the user says, "Thanks, I needed that!"

In an age when we are accustomed to being reminded of our unlimited potential, of our capacity to accomplish or become anything we conceive or imagine and to which we put our mind, "I am God and you are not," seemed an unlikely mantra for church growth or revitalization.

But then I thought of my friend in AA, John. John keeps a post-it note on his refrigerator. It reads, “There is a God, John, and it’s not you.”

I guess that too could sound deflating or diminishing. But that’s not how John took it. He heard it as a great relief. As good news. It wasn’t all up to him. He wasn’t, and didn’t have to be, in control of everything. It wasn’t all up to him. He could let God be God for him.⁵

I hope you can hear this as a great relief this morning, too. There is a God and it’s not you.

There is a judge and a redeemer and it’s not you. You are free from the burden of creating and maintaining your own identity and justifying yourself.

There is a God who has loved us with the truest and deepest love imaginable. A God who loves us like this right now.

A God who invites to love like this as a means of discovering who we truly are and what we were made for.

A God who wants our joy to be complete.

Amen.



⁵ <https://mbird.com/bible/seven-words-that-sum-up-the-entire-bible/>