

No Greater Love

Veteran's Day 2007 | Romans 5.6-11; John 15.12-17

On the night before his death, Jesus told his disciples,

*No one has greater love than this, than
to lay down one's life for one's friends.*

John 15.13

Given what was to happen the next day,
Jesus was speaking about the significance
of his own life and death.
And in case the disciples missed the point,
Jesus tells them in the next verse,

*You are my friends
if you do what I command you.*

John 15.14

and

*I do not call you servants any longer,
but I have called you friends . . .*

John 15.15

Jesus' death is an example of the extreme lengths
to which God would go to make right
our relationship with God.

*No one has greater love than this, than
to lay down one's life for one's friends.*

John 15.13

It's no wonder, then, why this verse becomes
an explanation for the sacrifice of a parent for a child, or
of a firefighter or police officer who dies in the line of duty, or
of a member of the military who gives his life for his squad.

And yet, our faith takes this noble notion of sacrifice

and raises the ante.

We can understand a mother or a father sacrificing their health or their comfort or even their life for their child.

We've had Amy in our lives only 3 months, but I'd walk barefoot across burning coals and crushed glass if it meant saving her from harm.

We can understand how a Marine or an Army soldier would throw himself on a hand grenade if it meant sparing his friends from certain harm.

And yet, our faith takes this noble notion of sacrifice and raises the ante.

Notice what Paul says in his letter to the Romans,

*God showed how much he loved us
by having Christ die for us,
even though we were sinful.*

Romans 5.8

and, still later,

*Even when we were God's enemies,
he made peace with us,
because his Son died for us.*

Romans 5.10

What a glimpse of grace!

We don't have to get our act squared away first so that God will love us.

Nope, God loves us while we are still messed up and "utterly helpless" (NLT) or "weak" (NRSV).

I like how Eugene Peterson has translated this passage:

*Christ arrives right on time to make this happen.
He didn't, and doesn't, wait for us to get ready.
He presented himself for this sacrificial death*

*when we were far too weak and rebellious to do anything
to get ourselves ready. And even if we hadn't been so weak,
we wouldn't have known what to do anyway.
We can understand someone dying
for a person worth dying for,
and we can understand how someone good and noble
could inspire us to selfless sacrifice.
But God put his love on the line for us
by offering his Son in sacrificial death
while we were of no use whatever to him.*

Romans 5.8-10
The Message

What an amazing grace!
While we were still enemies of God;
while we were still sinners and estranged from God,
God died for us. On the cross at Calvary
Jesus sacrificed his deity, his comfort, even his very life,
so that we might taste a spiritual freedom
that no human bravery could ever earn.

You and I are like the young man who, in July 1946,
jumped into the Merced River above Vernal Falls in Yosemite
to save 11 year old Keene Freeman who had fallen in
while trying to retrieve his canteen.
Orville Loos, twenty-one-years old and just out of the Navy,
leaped the guardrail and swam to the struggling boy,
reaching him when he was only a short distance
from the brink of the waterfalls.

Catching hold of the boy's shirt,
Orville tried vainly to drag him to safety.
But the force of the current was too much,
and both of them were swept over the roaring falls
to their death on the rocks 325 feet below.
He willed to save the boy,

tried his best and gave his life in the attempt,
but he lacked the ability to break the river's power.ⁱ

In our own spiritual life, you and I are unable to break
the power of sin that lives in us.
There is no amount of human labor or effort
that can mend the brokenness that is part of our lives.
But we are saved from our sins
by the loving hands of our savior
who plucks us from the grips of the current.
His nail-scarred hands hold us lovingly and permanently
in a bond of love that nothing will ever break.

Once upon a time,
the home of an English family was on fire.
They thought everybody was out but the baby girl.
The mother saved her.
For years as the child grew up
the mother went about the house with her hands covered.
In fact, no one in the family ever saw
the mother with her hands uncovered.
But the grownup daughter came into her room one day
unexpectedly, and the mother sat there
with her hands uncovered.
They were torn and scarred and disfigured.

Instantly the mother tried to cover them
as the girl came forward, but then she said,
"I had better tell you about it.
It was when the fire was in the house
and you were in your cradle.
I fought my way through the flames to get you.
I wrapped you in a blanket and dropped you
through the window, and somebody caught you.
I could not go down the stairway,

so I climbed out of the window.
My hands were burnt, and I slipped
and caught on the trellis work.
When I fell, my hands were torn.
The doctor did his best, but, my dear,
these hands were torn for you.”

And the girl, who had grown to womanhood
because of her mother’s sacrifice,
sprang toward her mother,
took one hand and then the other,
and buried her face in those hands,
as she kept saying, “They are beautiful hands,
beautiful hands.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Jesus’ nail-scarred hands are “beautiful,
beautiful hands” in our sight.
They are able to do for us what we ourselves cannot.
The meaning of Jesus’ sacrifice
is that our broken relationship with God and each other
is forever healed. Forever restored.

There’s a purpose behind this, though.
This gift of amazing grace is not the end,
but rather the means to an end.
Jesus points the way when he says,

*You did not choose me, but I chose you.
And I appointed you to go and bear fruit,
fruit that will last.*

John 15.16

Saving Private Ryan scene.

Private Ryan never earned the sacrifice of the squad
or the Captain; they didn’t know him.

They were simply doing their duty.
You and I can never earn the sort of sacrifice
Jesus makes on our behalf.
But when Captain Miller tells Ryan to “earn this”
I hear him charging Ryan with the same thing
that Jesus charges us:

Go and bear fruit.

At Hope, we talk about this as our ‘response-ability.’
The time and treasure and talent we give back to God here
don’t earn God’s love; they are our thank you for what God
has so graciously first given us.
This is our ‘ability to respond’ to God’s love
poured into our hearts.

At any given sporting event,
there are a few players and many spectators.
In church, there should only be players and no spectators.
We are all called to *go and bear fruit*.
Your fruit will be different than mine, which will be different
than yours.
We’re not all called to bear the *same* fruit, but
we *are* all called to go and bear *some* fruit.

Given the uncertainty in our world,
or in our congregation, or in your lives right now
it would be easy to sit on the sidelines,
and let others carry the load.
But Jesus doesn’t give us that option.
He doesn’t say,

Go and bear fruit when you feel like it.

or

*Go and bear fruit when
the housing market rebounds.*

or

*Go and bear fruit when
Pastor Paul gets back from sabbatical.*

or

*Go and bear fruit when
your children get to be a certain age.*

or

*Go and bear fruit, but when you retire
you don't have to any more.*

We go and bear fruit because that's our response-ability
to God's amazing grace in our lives.

*No one has greater love than this,
to lay down one's life for one's friends.*

John 15.13

We stand in humble awe of the sacrifice
our veterans have made on our behalf, and rightly so.
Without it, we could not live in freedom in this community.

How much more are we moved by the loving sacrifice
Jesus has made for us?

How much more sweetly does the freedom taste
that his body and blood brings us?

How much more awestruck are we
by the meaning of that sacrifice?

Amen

ⁱTan, Paul Lee, *Encyclopedia of 7,700 Illustrations*. Garland, Texas: Bible Communications, 1996.

ⁱⁱTan, Paul Lee, *Encyclopedia of 7,700 Illustrations*, Garland, Texas: Bible Communications, 1996.