

Sermon for February 25, 2018
“Love Starts Here: Sacrifice”

Mark 8:31-38

Love starts here. We recently celebrated Valentine’s Day. Now-a-days Valentines is all about giving your romantic partner the biggest box of candies or the biggest teddy bear or the most flowers. Because we all know that it is important that “he went to Jared” because “every kiss begins with Kay.”

This would all seem strange to St. Valentine. For one he was a celibate priest. But more importantly his idea of love was much different from candy and jewelry and flowers. St. Valentine was a martyr. He died for love of others. There are several different version of his legend, but basically he gave his freedom and then his life, because he loved God and loved others.

That’s what real love is. Real love, Biblical love, is about sacrifice. You may have heard that Greek has several words for love. *Eros* is a self-serving love. I love you because you have something I want. *Philia* is brotherly love. It means I love you because we share a lot in common. *Storge* is familial affection like that of parents for a children or children for their parents. But usually the Bible uses *agape*. This is love for the sake of the other. It is a love that puts the other first. It is a self-sacrificial love.

That is where true love starts; with sacrifice.

In the Bible passage we just read, Peter had just confessed Jesus. Jesus had said “Who do people say that I am?” After the disciples gave him a run down on all the rumors, he said “Who do you say that I am?” Peter said, “You are the Messiah.”

That is when Jesus started teaching them that he must suffer and die and rise again. The idea that he would die offended Peter. The Messiah was not supposed to die. The Messiah was supposed to defeat the Romans and establish an eternal kingdom. So Peter rebuked Jesus.

But Jesus turned back to Peter and rebuked him saying “You are thinking like people not like God.” Our idea of love is giving shiny or sweet things to people. God’s idea of love is Jesus giving his life for others. This is a whole different level or depth of love. It is defined by someone sacrificing their life for another. God’s idea of love is the self-sacrificial *agape* love I just described.

This self-sacrificial love is what Jesus’ life exemplified. But it is also the life he called us to. He went on to say “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” I think we really don’t appreciate the meaning behind this statement because we really don’t know what the cross represented to the disciples. To us the cross is a religious symbol, a work of art, a piece of jewelry. For them it was an instrument of torture. The Romans used it to slowly, painfully, and humiliatingly kill people while others watched. It was meant to terrorize and intimidate the population into compliance with the Roman Empire.

So “take up your cross and follow me” isn’t some religious sounding phrase. In our language it would be take up your electric chair and follow me, or take up your lethal injection

needle and follow me. Even then it would not get to the humiliating and public aspects of crucifixion or its role as a method of terrorizing and intimidating people. Maybe “take up your lynch mob and hangman’s noose and follow me” would be a better parallel, because the role of lynchings in our own country’s history would be closer to the way the Romans used crucifixion. The KKK, and other terrorist groups, used lynchings as a way of terrorizing and intimidating people through a public display of torture and death.

Are you ready to be humiliated, tortured and killed to follow Jesus? Remember Jesus’ statement right before this is “deny yourselves.” Then right after he says if you are willing to lose your life you will gain your life. Are you willing to deny yourself, and lose yourself in God’s will and love for others, to the point of death? That’s what Jesus did, so if we want to follow him we need to head in that direction.

So Jesus said “Deny yourself, take up your cross and follow me.” But how do we do that in our lives? It is fine to say that we should be willing to give our lives for others, but few of us ever have that opportunity. Some people do risk their lives, and even give their lives, for others, and we honor them as heroes. But most of us are never faced with the opportunity to literally give our lives for others.

We may not be faced with life or death circumstances, but we are always given chances to make smaller sacrifices. You may not be called upon to make the ultimate sacrifice of giving your life, but we all have many opportunities to make smaller sacrifices. Just as Jesus is our example in making the ultimate sacrifice of love by dying on the cross, he is also our example in making smaller sacrifices. John tells how just before going to the cross Jesus humbled himself, denied his position and privilege as Master and Rabbi, to wash his disciple’s feet. He could have commanded any of the disciples to do it, but he took it on himself; he knelt down and took on a dirty task out of love for his disciples.

Jesus told us to do the same. There are many ways that you can make smaller sacrifices to follow Jesus in love. Give of yourself for others. Go out of your way to help someone. Speak up lovingly against injustice, even though it may mean ridicule. Give of your time and resources to support efforts to alleviate hunger or abuse. Take the time, and the pain, to care about the suffering in the world.

Jesus said “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” You may be called upon in this life to take up a literal cross and die for someone else. I think of people around the world who are standing up for the Gospel and against injustice and are giving their lives. I think of civil right protesters in our own country who in my lifetime have been lynched for their Christian witness.

You may not be called on to make the ultimate sacrifice, but we all have opportunities to make smaller sacrifices. We all have the chance to wash others’ feet metaphorically speaking. We all have opportunities to roll up our sleeves and get down on our knees to care for others. We all have occasions to go out of our way to speak a word or perform an act of love or justice.

Jesus said, “deny yourself and take up your cross.” That’s what true love is all about. It is about putting ourselves aside and putting others first. Jesus demonstrated this in his life and in his death. Let us follow him in this path of loving sacrifice.

Love starts here: sacrifice.