



Broad Street Presbyterian Church

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“With a Little Help from My Friends”

John 15:9-17

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In this morning’s reading, Jesus says to the disciples:

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

Have you ever done that? Laid down your life for a friend? Has someone ever done that for you? I’ve been thinking a lot this past week about my friends—what I have done for them and what they have done for me. I have wonderful friends who, over the years, have listened to me and fed me and comforted me and, when needed, challenged me. Some have gone above and beyond the standard friend job description. I remember the time that I was exposed to head lice. I called up a friend who came over late one night. I sat in a chair in the kitchen as she slowly, painstakingly checked my hair for nits. Now that’s a true friend. Is that the kind of thing that Jesus is talking about when he says,

No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends?

I don’t know. Laying down one’s life sounds pretty serious, pretty intense. Does Jesus want us to risk our lives for our friends? For just our close friends? Or, in Jesus’ worldview, is everyone a close friend? Are there some things we shouldn’t put at risk for the welfare of others? Where do we draw the line between sacrificial love and unnecessary martyrdom? What exactly is Jesus asking of us?

Let’s spend a little more time with these words of Jesus. Let’s take them apart and then put them back together again. The word translated “lay down” also means to put or set aside. The word “life” in our reading can also be translated as heart or mind or soul or being.

To lay down one’s life is pretty dramatic. It implies that we are risking our physical well-being—perhaps to the point of death. A more accurate translation might be “put aside your ego.” Think about someone other than yourself. Set aside focus on self and connect with others. It’s less dramatic than laying down our lives but perhaps even more challenging to accomplish.

In her book *An Altar in the World*, author Barbara Brown Taylor writes:

...the hardest spiritual work in the world is to love the neighbor as the self—to encounter another human being not as someone you can use, fix, help, save, enroll, convince or control, but simply as someone who can spring you from the prison of yourself, if you will allow it.

She continues,

All you have to do is recognize another you “out there”—your other self in the world—for whom you may care as instinctively as you care for yourself. To become that person, even for a moment, is to

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understand what it means to die to yourself. This can be as frightening as it is liberating. It may be the only real spiritual discipline there is.¹

I love that. Taylor suggests that the most essential spiritual discipline is not prayer or worship or Bible study. The best and highest spiritual work is putting aside our own ego long enough to connect and relate to another human being.

In the spring of 1980, Colin Warner, an 18-year-old immigrant from Trinidad, was wrongfully convicted of murder. His conviction was based on coerced, false testimony. It was a bad situation. But Colin had a friend, a guy named Carl King. They grew up together in a village in Trinidad and grew even closer when they both moved to Brooklyn. Carl, who was 17 years old at the time, decided to help Colin. He visited him regularly in jail, went to his court appearances. And he vowed to help Colin get out of prison.

Carl and Colin had only just finished high school. Their families had no money. They didn't know any lawyers, and they weren't politically connected. Still, Carl and Colin strategized about appeals. Carl raised money on the outside. Colin learned to use the prison law library. He put together the first appeal himself. It was denied. For the second appeal, Carl found a lawyer in the yellow pages—also denied. The next was a real estate lawyer Carl met while he was closing on his house—denied. And then they managed to get one of the most famous defense lawyers in the country to file an appeal. That appeal failed as well.

Who would have blamed Carl if at that point he had given up on his friend, moved on with his life, focused on himself? But that's not what he did. He decided to reinvestigate the crime, come up with new evidence and witnesses. In order to understand the legal process better, Carl became a process server, someone who delivers legal documents to a defendant or person involved in a court case. It was a great way to meet lawyers. He asked everyone he met for suggestions and advice about Colin's case. He taught himself how to read court records and find witnesses. Carl spent every spare moment working on Colin's case—between 50 and 100 hours a week. It was coming between him and his other friends and family.

All those hours paid off. Because of Carl's hard work, Colin Warner was exonerated and released from prison in 2001. Carl King worked on his friend's case for twenty-one years.²

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I am in awe of Carl King. He spent two decades of his life helping a friend, saving a friend. For twenty years, he put the needs of his friend above his own. The work that Carl did for his friend, it brought meaning, purpose, structure to his life. Carl discovered his vocation. He now works full time re-investigating cases, helping to set people free.

Do you have a friend like Carl? Are you a friend like Carl? It's too high a standard. But this I know. Whenever we are able to put aside our own ego, when we put someone else's needs above our own, things go better. We regain perspective. We are released, if only momentarily, from the prison of the self.

There are so many ways to do this. Attend a funeral. Visit a prison. Return a phone call from a family member. Have a conversation with a friend where our primary role is to listen. Go to a nursing home.

Give some of your money away to help others. This month we are raising awareness and money for our neighborhood ministries programs. At their best, these programs do the same work that Carl did for his friend.

¹ Barbara Brown Taylor, *An Altar in the World*, p. 93.

² Carl and Colin's story is told in a podcast and a movie. <https://www.thisamericanlife.org/282/diy>
<http://crownheightsthemovie.com/>

At their best, these programs see those who are served as individuals—flawed and praiseworthy individuals—in need of that which we all need—a hand up, a little food, some help with schoolwork, legal advice, a safe and welcoming place to drop kids off for childcare. This morning, I invite you to give a little of yourself—share your resources—time, energy, money—to offer such things for others.

I need to be honest. It's hard to focus on others. It's so easy, so natural to keep the focus on ourselves. What if we viewed each day of our life as a movie? Who is the star of the movie? Too many days, my movie goes something like this. The life of Amy starring Amy, directed by Amy, written, edited and produced by Amy. Other people have roles to play, certainly, but to use Barbara Brown Taylor's language, too many days they exist for me to use, fix, help, save, enroll, convince or control. Too many days like that and—I know for myself—life stops working. I lose perspective. I feel distant from God and from others.

It is hard to focus on others for a sustained period of time—it takes discipline, intention, the support of a community. Church helps in all of this. One of the best things about being a part of a church is that it's hard to come here week after week and remain solely focused on one's self. On any given Sunday, we see others, we learn of their struggles and joys, we pray for one another and celebrate with one another. We come here and are reminded of the pain of the world, of the hopes and dreams of our neighbors. For at least one hour a week, it is about “we,” not “I.”

When that is our focus, things go better. Things go better. Jesus is going to lay down his life for his friends. Literally. And, good news, we are all his friends. He is not asking us to do the exact same work. He is asking us to do similar work—in small ways or large “Carl King” ways.

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

This morning, Jesus invites us to put aside our ego. He encourages us to focus on others. He knows that when we do this, things go better. For us. For others. For the community. For the world. And, when we do this, we grow a little closer to Jesus, the one who truly laid down his life for his friends.

Amen.