

## STRAIGHT FROM THE HEART

Well, here we are now at the conclusion of our Lenten journey to Enlightenment. This marks the third annual Lenten series I've led here, and although I offered a different theme approach than in the past two years, the journey itself has much the same end-point. The Lenten period encourages us as Christians to reflect on how we're living our lives as people of love. We're challenged to look inward at our dark sides, not to become more fearful of them, but to embrace them as part of our humanity. And if we go through them with the assurance that we are not alone, new light will always appear. Our journey these past weeks invited us to open our eyes and our ears to new awareness in our call. It asked us to open our mouths toward more authentic speaking. And today, we're looking at the role of our *hearts* in our living. After all, without a heart, we could not love. And more importantly, without a heart, we could not live. And wouldn't it be nice if we could mesh together our *living* with our *loving*.

Our New Testament readings today are both from the book of *First John*. Most biblical scholars believe it's the same *John* who wrote the fourth gospel in the NT. John had a different tone to his writings, and for me personally, I find some of his writings to be spiritually uplifting. But, as with all scriptures, we need to tread lightly as to how we interpret them. As we have come to see through our years, scripture only has value if it provides us with illumination and guidance in our living today. It only has value to the degree it opens our hearts to loving ourselves and others. But how do we interpret John's advice that we should *lay down our lives* for others? Are we to take this literally? Well, for the early followers of Jesus, their lives *were* often at risk when attempting to spread the Christian faith. Church leaders were often called before the rulers of the day to explain their beliefs and actions, and often were imprisoned and even executed. At this very moment, as we speak, Christians in eastern countries are forced to either renounce their Christian faith or be killed, often on the spot. And beyond the setting of the church, every day across the world, first responders such as police and fire fighters accept the risk to their own lives in the performance of their duties. But fortunately for most of us

here, our daily living does not include high risk. So is there perhaps another way to interpret and live out the concept of laying one's life down for friends?

Well, I would suggest there is, and it's rooted in our ability to feel and share compassion. Various dictionaries equate *compassion* with attributes like *sympathy*, *empathy*, *concern*, *leniency*, *tolerance and kindness*. One source compared it to pity, although I don't think they're the same thing. True pity can actually be demeaning. If we're in pain or distress, getting pity from someone puts us in an inferior position and can actually serve to keep us stuck in our pain. But while true compassion respects and acknowledges our pain, it also encourages and supports us in our efforts to move through the situation toward healing. And as we move through our own life issues, our own capacity for compassion becomes greater. We become more aware of the futility of our trying to fix someone else's problems, and simply respond from our hearts with the attributes I mentioned earlier. We receive true compassion from someone not when they try to give us answers for our pain, but when they sit with us when there are no answers. In this context, *laying down our lives* can be seen as simply opening our own humanity to another, however imperfect it is and always will be. It's what Jesus demonstrated in his healings. He didn't look down on the afflicted with pity or scorn. He didn't lecture them or try to give them pat answers. He simply offered his touch of love and compassion, freeing them from the darkness in which they were living. It's an example of what we can share with others, from within our own hearts.

In a book titled *Creative Ministry*, author Henry Nouwen writes about the concept of 'A Spirituality of Ministry' and suggests that Jesus' words about laying one's life down for his friends actually "summarizes the meaning of all Christian ministry." And while he is referring to the formal ministry of the church, his words can apply to all of us as professed Christians. As we grow and mature through the trials and tribulations of our own lives, our personal faith becomes more rooted in truth because it has survived our doubts. And we can become more compassionate toward others, and our lives can be true examples of faith and hope. And perhaps this puts the concept of laying down our lives for others into a more realistic concept. Our lives, when lived through our hearts, can demonstrate true beauty and love. We don't give up our lives. We simply share them.

So, as we conclude our Lenten journey, we acknowledge the reality that it's an ongoing journey throughout our lives. We'll always be challenged to sort out the distortions in our seeing and hearing. We'll always be challenged in when we should speak and what we should say. But we must always be open to our hearts – especially accepting our own human imperfections. Think back to our memories of our parents and grandparents and others – how often do we laugh at their foibles and imperfections– and how much more do these memories draw us even closer to their spirits. We owe ourselves the same gentleness in acknowledging our own imperfect living. We need to let our internal love energy flow through our own hearts and into all of our being, and then to others. Let our journey through our lives always lead us toward enlightenment of a brighter way of living. And indeed, if we commit to move through the shadows of our pain and doubt, a brighter awareness will emerge. Our choice is always a free one – stay in darkness, or feel the pain and move toward a more liberating place, a place where our hearts will feel *good*. And when those shadows come to us along our paths, as they indeed have and will continue to be, take heart from this one reality: a shadow can only exist when there is light nearby. Bless your hearts.

**Brian Stocks. Westminster United Church. March 18, 2018.**