

The two greatest commandments in the New Testament, found first in the book of Matthew and then throughout John's writing, including today's reading from 1 John, are to love the Lord and to love one another. When you think of your family and friends, how easy is it to love them? And even though they may annoy the heck out of you sometimes, is there anything you wouldn't do for them if they were in need?

How easy is it to love your crabby neighbor, the one who always seems to complain about something? Or how about that co-worker who is always trying to get ahead at your expense? How easy is it to love the man who beats his wife and kids every time he drinks? Or the mother who throws her 6-year old son off of a bridge? Or the gunman who opens fire in a school full of children? How easy is it to love them? How many of us would be willing to lay down our lives for one of them?

More often than not, we think of love in terms of feelings – I love my partner, I love fishing, I love mint ice cream. Love is equated with things that make us feel happy. We throw that word around a lot, don't we? *"I love your shoes."* *"I love the color of that building."* We water it down even more to mean things we enjoy. Throughout the New Testament, however, love is not defined by what we feel but by what we do. The Gospels are full of examples of Jesus loving through actions. He led by example, feeding the hungry, healing the sick, spending time with the folks living outside the grace of the church or community, even raising the dead (though I'm pretty sure he's okay if we don't accomplish that last one). And, then, he showed us the ultimate act of love and laid down his life for us.

What does it mean for us to love one another? John says, to love someone, you should lay down your life for them. He doesn't mean this in the literal sense – though, that sometimes happens – how many teachers at Sandy Hook died to protect their students? There are many ways we can lay down our lives; we do it every time we set aside what we want to take care of the needs of others. John gives a specific example in terms of sharing material goods or wealth, but opening yourself up, making yourself vulnerable by sharing compassion, kindness, understanding, and time with someone who needs it is also how we lay down our lives.

I have to confess that I've been guilty of rationalizing my way around that whole "love one another" command. It's easy to love my family and friends, and it's easy to love my community and it's easy to "love" the innocent, helpless or suffering people around the

world. But those people who promote hatred or who do repulsive or heinous things – I figure they must be going to hell and surely I’m absolved from loving them, right?

Well, a few years ago I heard a sermon by Bishop Aitken that turned me upside down. First, let me tell you, I’m not one of those people who easily remembers lines from movies or lyrics from songs, unlike some of my confirmation kids who can recite the entire dialogue or sing every song from a movie. And, truth be told, the same goes for sermons – I rarely remember them. But this one was different. It was as if the Holy Spirit flicked me on the head and said, “Pay attention.” The bishop’s sermon was about Jesus commanding Peter to feed his sheep and the point of the sermon was that Jesus said, “Feed. My. Sheep.” There were no qualifiers on it. Jesus didn’t say, “Feed only the sheep you like, or agree with, or who believe just like you.” Jesus said, “Feed. My. Sheep.” And that meant ALL of his sheep.

When Jesus commanded us to “Love one another,” there were no qualifiers on it. We are to love everyone, not just those who stay in the fold or on the right path. We are also to love those who have lost their way, those whom we deem unworthy or unlovable. You see, we are all children of God. Every single person is worthy of that love. Do we stray off of the path and stumble into darkness? Do we make regrettable decisions and do awful things? Yes, we do. But here’s the most important thing you will hear today or any other day for that matter: There is nothing you or I can **ever** do that will stop God from loving us. Nothing. No matter how far we stray or how dark the darkness, God will always love us and Jesus the Good Shepherd will always be there to lead us back into the fold.

I tend to rage and think all manner of bad things about those who do awful things. I don’t understand why they do what they do, but I know this: Jesus laid down his life for them just as much as for me. He loves each one of us equally. Does this mean that God loves evil? No, but in his eyes, *everyone* is redeemable. “Love one another.” It’s probably the hardest commandment we’ll ever have to follow. Yet, we are all capable of great love and compassion. Christ has shown us the way and through his life we have the strength and courage and ability to love those in need of love. What amazing things could be accomplished in this world if everyone reached out in love! “Let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.”

Amen.