

No one has greater love than this

A sermon shared with the congregation of St. Andrew's United Church

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by Rev. Dave Le Grand

No one has greater love than this; to lay down one's life for one's friends. Where have you seen a love like that?

Today, we recognize the brave souls who served in the military. So many of whom carry wounds, visible and invisible. A love for someone, or a value like peace or freedom, that compels a person to risk life and comfort.

The love that Jesus speaks of, "agape", is the Greek word, well, many of us have heard it before. It is less of the romantic kind, but the kind of love that is deep, and selfless. The Creator's love for God's children so deep, that the Creator becomes human, vulnerable. A love in the Gospel of John, that builds community, communion.

Jesus enjoys a very close relationship with the Creator God, whom Jesus calls (implying an intimate relationship) "Abba" or "Father" or, more literally translated as "Daddy." That love, he tells all who want to follow him, is the template for our relationship with Jesus, and, our relationship, our communion, with one another.

One of the many analogies that Augustine offers for helping us to understand the intimate relationality of the Holy Trinity is that *God is the lover, the beloved, and, the love that unites them.* As Jesus observes, this love should be so deeply woven into our lives that we might even find ourselves called to die for it.¹

Have you seen or experienced that love? It might be the protective love of a parent for their child, or, the love of a leader who rises above the cynicism of politics to fight for clean water, or fundamental rights of children to a safe school in a remote Canadian reserve. This is a love that seeks to be inclusive of all; even loving and including people who differ in opinion, possibly loving a person who lashes out at you. I won't speak for you, but I'm still working on how to live out that kind of love!

There is a story told of a Christian Chinese rice farmer² whose fields lay high on a mountain. Every day the farmer pumps water into the paddies of new rice. Every morning she returns to find that her neighbour who lives down the hill has just opened the dikes surrounding her fields to let the water fill the neighbour's lower lying fields. Things become desperate.

"What should I do? My rice will die if this continues. How long could this stealing of my water go on?" She worries. She prays, and comes up with a solution. The next day the farmer rises early in the morning and *first fills his neighbour's fields*; then she attends to her own. It works! As an aside, the evangelical Christian storyteller adds here that the "unbelieving" neighbour becomes a Christian, seeing such demonstration of Christian love.

I'm focusing less on converting others, but more about the conversion of the Christian farmer. How did she do that! How many of us might be inclined to march down the hill to

¹ "Theological Perspective", David S. Cunningham. *Feasting on the Word*.

² Chinese Christian evangelist is Watchman Nee, posted told by David Huss at <https://www.sermoncentral.com>

give that neighbour a piece of our mind? No greater love, Christ's love that we are to imitate, than the love that is willing even to die for one's friends. To take a risk and love the neighbour who gets under my skin. How does that love become enfleshed – how does that holy love become incarnated – not just in Jesus, but through you and I.

This is a risk-taking love, isn't it?

I have some special people in my life who have dedicated, and some who still dedicate, their lives to peacekeeping in the military. Some carry burdens from their service that I cannot imagine. Here's the thing, though. We are not here at all to glorify war, or the military. We do give thanks for their bravery and sacrifice, and hopefully today we rededicate ourselves to growing within ourselves the kind of love that defies tribalism, territorialism; that doesn't erect fences and barriers between people and nations, but tears barriers down. We are invited to welcome deep within us the kind of love that Jesus modelled, that builds daring, diverse, radically inclusive community.

What does that love of God embodied in Jesus look like? It is the love that is willing to take risks. Are you and I willing to even risk our comfort for something? Risk our reputation for something? Risk our lives for something? Our family? Of course.

But as a chapter closes after four years of a leader whose rule has been described by some as a tyrant, the voices of brave women and men who have challenged bullies echo in my brain. Soldiers, even pacifists like Dietrich Bonhoeffer who heard the cry for help and could not ignore the call to face down a tyrant in the Second World War. You and I can never take for granted the peace that we enjoy, or the freedom, this freedom, to speak truth to power in public. May God's holy love shine through us evermore to struggle for peace and health for the all-too-many near and far *who do not enjoy such privileges*. May we invite every child of God into the warmth, dignity, and the sense of a community that loves them unconditionally. Amen.