

Sermons at Christ Church

Be a Joyful Gift to Others

Easter IV

The Reverend Emmanuel Ato Mercer

Jesus says “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.” The sheep must be valuable and worthy of the life of the good shepherd. The good news is that the shepherd doesn’t lay down his life for some of the sheep, but all of the sheep. That is to say that each sheep is of ultimate value and importance to the good shepherd-to the point where the shepherd considers his life to be of the same value as that of the sheep, and so is willing to offer his life for the sake of the sheep.

What is it about the sheep, you and I that would make the good shepherd lay down his life for us? The good shepherd must love the sheep to the point where the only way that the shepherd can express his love for the sheep is to offer the-self. Truth is, you can only save those whom you love. You can only lay down your life for those whom you love because that sacrifice is costly. Remember, nothing good comes cheap.

There’s an African proverb ‘One who loves you, loves you with your dirt.’ This proverb assumes that an African kid like myself who played in dirt always had dirt on myself, and it didn't matter how much dirt I had on me, there was nothing that I could do that would change the way I am loved. I was loved no matter what. This kind of love is unconditional and that is the mark of the good shepherd who loves us despite our dirt. The Good Shepherd selflessly picks us up, regardless of our sins, washes us, cleanses us and anoints our head with oil. And yet, we are never constrained by the number of times we are washed clean, we get ourselves dirty again. But our dirt isn’t enough for the good shepherd. My grace is sufficient for you, the Shepherd assures us.

The good shepherd teaches us that to lay down one’s life for the sake of the other isn’t an easy proposition. It is costly. But we do it anyway, not because of the cost involved but because of the unbounded love that shapes the way we look at ourselves and each other.

There's an ethnic group in my native Ghana which celebrates a unique festival. The history of the festival is that members of the ethnic group offended the deity. To pacify the deity, the deity demanded the sacrifice of a human being each year. It became challenging for the people to elect somebody who would freely offer himself to be sacrificed. Nobody wanted to offer himself or herself for the sake of the whole. They approached the deity and asked the deity to reconsider. The deity demanded a live lion. But after a couple of years they realized that it cost more human lives to catch a live lion than the offering of a single human being. They approached the deity again to reconsider. The deity asked for a live deer, and they have been offering a live deer till today.

Today's gospel story helps us to understand that the Shepherd willingly lays down his life for the sheep. And the writer of John reminds us that our knowledge of the Shepherd's love is derived solely from the willingness of the Shepherd to embrace death for the sake of the sheep. The writer also holds high the selfless act of the Good Shepherd as an example for us. We also ought to lay down our lives for the other because that is the only way that we can bring the other sheep which do not belong to this fold but must be brought into the fold. We can only bring those sheep into the fold through the example of a costly love which invites us to lay down our lives.

The Easter question is, what is it about you that would make another lay down their life for you? Can you lay down your life for another? Are you open to being the kind of shepherd who stands between the wolf and the sheep? Are you willing to be the kind of shepherd who leaves the ninety-nine sheep for the sake of the one lost sheep-just because the ninety-nine are of the same value as that one sheep? Love is costly. And it is more expensive than the stuff you get at a yard sale.

A pastor went to a yard sale and saw a little boy with a lawn mower. The pastor asked the boy how much he was willing to take for the lawn mower. The little boy responded that I would take \$50. The pastor then said, well let me try if it works before I pay for it. Go ahead and try it. The pastor stepped up and pulled the string but the mower wouldn't start. He then said to the little boy, what's wrong with the mower, it would even start. My father said that if you cuss at it, it will start. The boy told the pastor. To which the pastor responded, in my 40 years of ministry, I have never used a cuss word, and you want me to use a cuss word to start a lawn mower? Well, if you keep pulling at it, it will surely come out.

Make no mistake, sometimes life becomes like an old lawnmower-it is simply too difficult to start. Not that it doesn't work, it works alright but you have to dig deep, you have to keep pulling the string before the cuss word comes out, you have to really dig deep, you have to find more than enough reason to sacrifice in order to create meaning for someone. It can be costly.

But when we understand that love to be a duty, a responsibility and a debt, the task then is not to find those we can love, but to love those who have already been given to us or chosen for us-those who are outside the fold but still need the good news of God.

Someone once said that "God gave us our relatives; thank God we can choose our friends." Yes, we can choose our friends, but our duty towards everyone supersedes our choices. That is why our prayer is that our love may not be determined by the actions of the recipient of that costly love. That is the cross we freely and selflessly carry, and it is one we must willingly desire to carry because like the Good Shepherd we live in an infinite debt to love.

The desire to willingly embrace the cost of love is what separates the Good Shepherd and the hired hand. It isn't about their ability-for each has the ability, an equal ability if I may add. The difference is the desire, the longing to freely give of oneself in love without counting the cost.

For the moment we begin to count the cost is the moment we ask ourselves if another is deserving of our costly love.

The Good Shepherd understands that the one who loves is the one who is in debt, the one who loves is aware of being gripped by love. And those who are aware of the Shepherd's love aren't afraid when they find themselves in the valley of death. For they know that the Shepherd is reliable, dependable and trustworthy-they know the shepherd walks with them. They know the Shepherd's love, they have tasted the Shepherd's love and can count on that costly love.

Take a moment to think about Peter and the disciples who came face-to-face with Annas the high priest to answer questions about the healing of a sick man. The power of the resurrection was such that Peter and others could face their persecutors and boldly proclaim Christ's redeeming work to the very people who led the crucifixion.

For these disciples, the stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone upon which they were anchored and grounded. And nothing could scare them into submission. They were no longer afraid because they knew that the Good Shepherd was with them.

I am the Good Shepherd. I lay down my life for the sheep. I offer my life for the sheep. It is costly but I offer it anyway. Not only because my love for you is sacred, but unlike the hired hand who bears no responsibility to you, I am responsible for you. I hold you in the palm of my hand. I will not abandon or forsake you when you go through those hard and difficult times-remember it is my presence which sustains you. It is in me that you find great comfort for your tired feet. It is in me that your spirit finds rest from a world of weariness. It is in me that your famished souls are fed at the table that I prepare for you. It is in me that you find the still waters with which you wash your face, your hands and your feet, it is in me that you find the still waters which quenches your thirst. It is in me that you find a heart to love.

This is my prayer for us today, awaken us O God in our slumber so we may come to know that we were born to manifest your glory within us-the glory of selfless giving. May our deepest fear not be about our inadequacy, may our holy fear be the acknowledgement that we are your children and that we are powerful beyond measure, and that playing small does not serve the world. May we always go big in love's costly debt. May we always find in you our salvation. May we always find in you our good shepherd, the ultimate example of a costly love.

Amen