Christ be with me,
be after me,
be before me,
and be at my right and left hand.
May everything I do be for Christ. Amen.

PLEASE BE SEATED

Good morning, my brothers and sisters in Christ, both those of you here with me in New Brick and those of you with us online. It has been over a year since I have attended a Sunday service in New Brick and it's been 16 months since I last gave a sermon on a Sunday. My heart is filled with joy to be here with you this morning to share the word of God.

Jesus said

> I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd. For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father."

Today in the gospel Jesus makes a bold statement of Jesus' own free will. Jesus has chosen of his own accord and power to do that which God the Father has called upon him to do. Let me read a portion of the gospel to you again: for this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again.

Jesus is telling us clearly that he has the free will or power to choose the direction of his life. He has the choice not others, not the secular or religious authorities who seek to stop him, not the people who listen and doubt, not the one who would betray him, not those with different expectations of a Messiah. Jesus chose of his own accord to lay down his life in order to take it up again for his sheep, for us. And we read that God the father loves him because Jesus chose to accept the call of God the father to come and be our shepherd.

And let's consider how Jesus lived out his choice. He chose to come down from heaven and become incarnate on Earth. In his human life he was most likely a carpenter living in the town of Nazareth in Galilee. He could have remained in Heaven or in Nazareth. Instead he lay down those lives and took up a new one in service to God his father. In the life he took up he could have come in great glory like a mighty warrior or a powerful king. In many ways the Hebrew people had expected their Messiah to be like a warrior king who would come and defeat the oppressors of Judea. Jesus came with a different purpose however than to overthrow the Roman oppressors with military might. He came for the purpose of calling humanity back to God and he came to be a living example of God's immutable, unconditional love for us and God's radical call for us to love the world as God does. And ultimately he came to give up his life for the forgiveness of our sins and for our salvation.

As Saint John wrote in his first letter

> We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help? Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action. And by this we will know that we are from the truth and will reassure our hearts before him whenever our hearts condemn us; for God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything.

Jesus lay down his life for us due to his great love for us. Our response to that love is to also lay down our lives for one another. Not because we are required to do so, but because we have made our own choice to be a follower of Jesus, to be a Christian, who in our baptismal covenant with God promised to proclaim the word and example of the good news of God in Christ, to seek and serve Christ in all persons, to love our neighbors as ourselves, to strive for justice and peace among all people, and to respect the dignity of every human being. I believe that when Jesus calls us to lay down our lives, he is calling us to fulfill our baptismal vows by looking beyond our own self-interests to take action to address the greater interests and needs of the world.

Saint John said in his letter "how does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses to help?" Saint John's question calls us to examine our lives as we know them and ask ourselves if we are loving others and living our lives "not in word or speech, but in truth and action." I believe that the love of God for us and all of humanity and creation calls us through our baptismal vows to live lives in the world that heal the sick, feed the hungry, love the outcast, lift up the oppressed, respect the dignity of all people, and breakdown those structures and actions that alienate people from each other whether due to ethnicity, race, gender, sexual identity, economic status, ability, or religious belief and tradition.

Let me share with you a few examples of how some who follow Jesus have laid down their lives in truth and action to help our brothers and sisters in need. We know that the Apostles Peter, his brother Andrew, and John and James, the sons of Zebedee were called by Jesus as they were fishing. They immediately put down their nets to follow Jesus. Peter, Andrew, John, and James put down their lives as successful fisherman to follow Jesus and become instead fishers of people. Now they did not walk away from everything in their lives. We hear of Jesus going to Peter's home where Peter's mother-in-law is ill and of the mother of James and John speaking with Jesus. What they did do was to lay down their lives as they were in order to take up a new life of service to God. In a more contemporary example, yesterday people from Dream Builders, including parishioners from Christ Church and other religious organizations, lay down their lives to spend time building desks to help children be more successful in their studies by having a dedicated place for schooling and homework. Those who gathered to build desks made a choice to step outside of the regular routines and activities of their lives for a time and instead build desks for children. And let me share a personal example where someone else chose to put aside her life to improve mine. Many of you know that for five years, from 2015 to 2020, I was on dialysis due to a form of kidney failure that runs in my family. I am thrilled to stand here today telling you that I am now almost nine months past my successful kidney transplant that took place on August 11, 2020. My dear friend Jean Bunker, a former parishioner of Christ Church, was my living donor. Jean chose to change her life in order to give me one of her kidneys. Jean had been determined to do this even knowing that the transplant could fail, that she herself could have medical complications, that she would need to take several weeks off from work to recover from the surgery, that during her recovery her life and that of her family would be disrupted as she healed, and even post-surgery that there were certain changes she would need to make to continue to be a healthy person with one kidney. But Jean chose of her own accord to lay down her life as she knew it to give me one of her kidneys, whom we fondly call Marigold, and then to pick up her life post-transplant. If Jean were here this morning, she would tell you that her choice, made of her own accord, to be a living organ donor was one of the best things that had ever happened in her life. Jean knew that it would change my life for the better, yet neither of us had fully anticipated that the life she would pick up after surgery would also be transformed. Jean's choice to see a person in need, me, and to offer her help, has completely transformed my life as well. Before the surgery, three times a week I spent four hours on dialysis and on the days in between I often was tired and in discomfort. Several times during those five years on dialysis

I was in the hospital with complications, and I had to have both of my kidneys removed in 2017. Jean's choice to be a living organ donor undoubtedly lengthened my life. Because I now have a functioning kidney, I too have been able to lay down my life as I've known it and to pick up a new life in which I am now discerning a call to be a deacon. My call to the diaconate is something I have been called to pursue for many years, but without my transplant I would not have been able to pursue this new life to which God is calling me.

We each can do our own individual part by taking action to fulfill the call of God to love our neighbors as ourselves. We don't need to be a Mother Teresa or Archbishop Desmond Tutu or Saint Paul to have an impact. God created them uniquely for the missions to which he called them. And he has created each and every one of us uniquely for the missions to which he calls us. As you sit here today in these chairs or on your sofa or your patio or wherever it is that you may be, God is calling you and me to lay down our lives as they are and to pick them up as the living embodiment of God's truth and action in the world.

In his own ministry Jesus continually strove to eliminate the barriers that people erect to keep them alienated from each other. Jesus walked and healed and ate and talked with all people. He met and talked with the Sadducees and the Pharisees who were the elite of Judean society. He ate with the tax collectors who were reviled by the people. He spoke to the Samaritan woman at the well even though a Jewish man would not normally have interacted alone with a woman or a Samaritan. He healed the soldier whose ear was cut off even though that soldier came to arrest him. He forgave the criminals who were crucified with him. He called Paul from a life persecuting Christians into a life spreading the good news of Christ throughout the Mediterranean. And Jesus chose of his own accord, and in recognition of God's great love for all of us, to lay down his life for the salvation of all. My family in Christ. today we each can chose of our own accord to lay aside those parts of our lives that separate us from God and from fulfilling our baptismal vows. We can choose instead lives of love, not in word or speech, but lives of love in truth and action, lives that carry the love of God that abides in each of us into the world. Amen.