

St. Paul's Episcopal Church

Sunday, April 25, 2024

Sermon by J. Barrett Lee, Intern

*I left my heart in San Francisco,
high on a hill, it calls to me:
To be where little cable cars climb halfway to the stars.
The morning fog may chill the air, I don't care.
My love waits there, in San Francisco,
above the blue and windy sea.
When I come home to you, San Francisco,
your golden sun will shine for me.*

TONY BENNETT

Isn't that a great song? Tony Bennett really knows how to make me feel homesick (and I'm not even from San Francisco!).

Personally, the place on Earth that captured my heart in that way are the Blue Ridge Mountains in western North Carolina. Those ancient hills feel like old friends to me. They are tall enough to be humbling and gentle enough to be inviting. From the Beacon Heights summit, you can see for ten miles or more on a clear day, the landscape looking like a wrinkled blanket that stretches off to infinity. If I was to write this song, I would have to sing, "I left my heart on Grandfather Mountain."

The beauty of this song is that Tony's love for San Francisco makes you long for a place/person where you left your heart, even though your body has taken you far away. I want you to remember that feeling, as we turn to look at today's gospel,

because that's what Jesus is talking about when he says, "The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep."

When we hear these words, we tend to think that Jesus is talking exclusively about his death on the cross. We hear "lays down his life" as the language of sacrifice, in the same way that a firefighter might "lay down her life" in the line of duty while saving people from a burning building. To be sure, this understanding is partially correct. Jesus' death is a very important part of "laying down his life," but it's also much more than that.

In Greek, the word that the author of John's gospel uses here for "lays down" is *Tithemi*, which literally means, "to put, place, set or establish." Likewise, the Greek word for "life" used here is *Psuche*, which means "soul, as the seat of affections and will." *Psuche* shares the same root as English words like, "Psyche" and "Psychology," which have to do with the mind. So, if we were to re-translate the Greek words of John 10:11, we could say, "The good shepherd *places his soul upon* the sheep," or, to borrow a phrase from Mr. Tony Bennett, "The good shepherd *left his heart with* the sheep." The only difference is that Tony left his heart in San Francisco, but for Jesus, "San Francisco" is you.

The people on Earth today who are best able to understand what this is like are parents. Good parents "leave their hearts" with their children on a daily basis. Essayist Elizabeth Stone wrote so profoundly about what this is like. She says,

"Making the decision to have a child – it is momentous. It is to decide forever to have your heart go walking around outside your body."

ELIZABETH STONE

Of course, parents are by no means the only people who understand this. Those who have given themselves fully to a place, person, cause, or vocation can understand what it feels like “to have your heart go walking around outside your body.”

In fact, human beings aren't even the only creatures in the universe that do this. Here is another neat example: When you look up at the Sun (while wearing protective lenses, of course), you can see a giant ball of hydrogen undergoing the process of nuclear fusion. Every second of every day, our Sun fuses approximately 700 million tons of hydrogen into 696 million tons of helium. The reason for that slight difference in mass, according to my physicist friend, is that a tiny amount of matter in each atom is converted into energy through nuclear fusion. When you add that up to the size of the Sun, which is about a million times as big as the Earth, you realize that the Sun is converting its own body into starlight at a rate of 4 million tons per second.

This light energy, as we know, then takes eight minutes to travel 93 million miles to Earth, where it hits the leaves of plants and drives the process of photosynthesis. Through the food chain, that energy is continually recycled around the planet as the fuel for life itself. The Sun is literally giving its heart to us at a rate of 4 million tons per second, all day, every day. We humans have no way of paying the Sun back for this gift of life, so we pay it forward instead. The best way to give thanks for this gift of life is to dedicate ourselves to the flourishing of all life on Earth.

It is the same with Jesus, “the Good Shepherd” who “lays down his life for the sheep.” When we understand “lays down his life” as “places his soul” or “leaves his heart,” we can understand that Jesus was not only “laying down his life” for us on the cross, but in everything he ever said or did. In his teaching, healing, welcoming, forgiving, challenging, and calling, Jesus was continually “giving his

heart” to the people around him. He asks for nothing in return. We can never “pay back” the gift of love that Jesus gave, so Jesus simply asks us to “pay it forward” instead.

Jesus asks us to love one another in the same way that he loves us. Our calling, as followers of the Good Shepherd, is to “place our souls” with one another in the same way that the Good Shepherd has “placed his soul” with us. We are not to be like “the hired hands,” who run away from tough situations because there’s nothing in it for us. Instead, we are to give ourselves fully to the task of nurturing life on Earth.

So, I ask you this morning to consider: Where do you “place your soul?” What is that person, place, or cause to which you dedicate yourself so fully that you are willing to stake your life on it? How do you “pay forward” the gift of life that has been so freely given to you? What service do you render to the family, church, community, and causes where you “give your heart?”

Answer this question for yourself, and you will be fulfilling the commandment of Jesus, who said,

“Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.”

MATTHEW 25:40

Jesus does not need our worship any more than the Sun needs our gratitude for the gift of light. All he asks of us is that we continue to “pay it forward” by loving one another as he loves us.