

UNENDING LOVE
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Fourth Sunday of Easter
Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

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Psalm 23

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. Even through the darkest valley, you are with me.

1 John 3:16-24

We know love by this: Christ Jesus laid down his life for us — and we ought to lay down our lives for one another.

Let me pause there to say: “laying down our lives” doesn’t mean letting people walk all over us; and in case you’re thinking “laying down our lives” might mean death and martyrdom, along comes this next line.

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? My dear ones, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.

In other words: “laying down our lives” has to do with loving others, being helpful and kind even to annoying in-laws. I know, crucifixion might be easier, but few of us get off that easily.

John 10:11-18

Jesus said, “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.”

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In the game of “if you were an animal what kind of animal would you like to be,” I’ve never heard anyone say: “I’d like to be a sheep.” A ram, maybe, but not a sheep, probably because sheep are extremely vulnerable to danger and thus vulnerable to suffering. So whether we are a sheep or a human being, it’s good to have some one with us in times of danger and times of suffering. And suffering, it seems, is the common lot of most of us, if not all.

If you’re paying attention, you can’t miss the suffering in this world and you might wonder if it will ever end. From what I’ve seen, it doesn’t look like suffering will end any time soon.

Refugees and migrants will keep drowning in the sea because God apparently no longer parts the seas for refugees to walk on dry ground. Refugees and migrants will keep drowning. Ebola and the next epidemic, the next famine, the next typhoon and the next earthquake will keep taking lives.

ISIS and its successors will keep beheading hostages. Drones will keep killing the innocent. Traffickers will keep selling children. Killers will keep shooting up schools. Bigots will keep persecuting.

The suffering never ends.

Multinational corporations will keep destroying mountaintops and poisoning our water and food. Big Pharma will keep hooking people on legal drugs far surpassing illegal addictions. Cancer will keep gnawing away. Financial markets will crash. Homes will burn. Pensions and jobs will be lost.

Will suffering ever end? It doesn’t look like it.

And it's not just the big world and those big headline-grabbing problems. Suffering is right here, in our small world, in our community, in our homes, in our lives—largely unnoticed.

I don't know everything about everyone here but I know enough to tell you this: some of us are parents whose children can't shake tormenting demons. Sitting among us every Sunday are parents suffering endlessly over the fate of their children.

Some of us are children whose aging parents teeter between life and death. The worries of bills, predators and broken hips are endless. Sitting among us every Sunday are children suffering endlessly over the fate of their parents.

Some of us are husbands and wives whose spouse is afflicted with an incurable, debilitating disease or some intractable emotional disorder. "In sickness and health, till death do us part" rings and rings in their ears as their own bodies wear down from endless care and anxiety. Sitting among us are men and women suffering endlessly over the fate of their spouses or partners.

Some of us are men and women, boys and girls whose body and spirit have been broken by grief or illness or memories of domestic abuse. Depression is a constant companion. Despair is endless.

Some of us are young people whose dream of a perfect job, an education, or a marriage has fizzled. Disappointment and heartbreak are endless.

Some of us are teachers, healthcare providers, or government employees shackled by arcane and inhumane systems that subvert virtuous work. The forms, paperwork, pettiness and aggravations are endless. Dreams of making the world a little better have burnt to endless ash.

All of us are citizens of a great nation, a once proud nation now turned vain and haughty, beset by greed, appalling inequality, racism, corruption and imperialistic notions of policing the whole world. As soon as one war ends another begins. Many of us suffer endless shame, guilt and fear.

Will suffering ever end? It doesn't look like it. Which brings us back to the gospel and Psalm for today, Psalm 23.

The crucifixion of Jesus is endless. The innocent are continually crucified in one way or another. Suffering is endless.

The crucifixion of Jesus may be endless. But so is the Resurrection. Suffering, as it turns out, is part of the victory. At least that's what the Resurrection stories seem to say. No Easter without Good Friday. The power that vindicated the love embodied in Jesus, that power lives and dies in solidarity with victims of Empire and society.

As far as we can know, suffering will never end. But if we pay attention, we can know something else: *we are blessed with an unending love*. Suffering may be endless, but so is love.

The more we give ourselves away, the more we lay down our lives for the sake of others, the larger we become. We are resurrected from tombs of gloom, paralysis and despair. The more we hoard ourselves the smaller we become. One way leads to heaven on earth; the other to hell on earth.

There is much in this world that can't be cured or fixed. But there is nothing in this world to keep us from acting with compassion, which is to say, *suffering with*—being there for others the way the good shepherd is there for the sheep, a presence through the dark valley.

There is no end to suffering. But no one should ever suffer alone. And it's amazing to me that hardly anyone ever does.

I am continually amazed how people, all kinds of people, in various times and places, in godforsaken situations continually rise up to rescue, relieve, repair and rebuild destroyed places and lives. I have seen many hopeless situations only to see people arriving in waves of love and compassion.

Suffering may be endless—but so is love.

We don't have to create it.

We only have to let it be.

We only have to let it in and let it out.

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We Are Loved By An Unending Love
Rabbi Rami Shapiro

We are loved by an unending love.
We are embraced by arms that find us
even when we are hidden from ourselves.
We are touched by fingers that soothe us
even when we are too proud for soothing.
We are counseled by voices that guide us
even when we are too embittered to hear.
We are loved by an unending love.

We are supported by hands that uplift us
even in the midst of a fall.
We are urged on by eyes that meet us
even when we are too weak for meeting.
We are loved by an unending love.

Embraced, touched, soothed, and counseled,
Ours are the arms, the fingers, the voices;
Ours are the hands, the eyes, the smiles;
We are loved by an unending love.