

April 25, 2021 – 1 John 3:16-24

This is one of those times that I wonder about many things. Why are we here? What is our purpose? Where does the value of life come from? What role does God have in our lives and in our world? How do we know whether our life has made a difference? Will anybody miss us for long when we are gone?



So many questions with so few answers!

What led to some of these questions and others was the recent decision by the Ontario government to impose a number of restrictions on the folks of Ontario only to withdraw them within 24 hours because of pushback from many citizens of Ontario, followed by statements from some of the science and medical advisors for the government that these restrictions were not recommended by them while other recommendations that have been recommended by them have not been put in place. Are things going to get messy at Queen's Park or will the people making decisions and advising the government going to work through their differing opinions about the best way to deal with this virus in a manner that is good for the majority of the people who live in Ontario? I imagine this question applies to people who live in other parts of Canada as well.

Then, I read the assigned scripture passage from the first letter of John and found an answer to some of my questions, especially the one about how to work through tough situations when there is a difference of opinion on how to best handle it. The author of John's letter writes: "We know love by this – that [Jesus] 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?"

What the author appears to be saying is that love that is unconditional and comes from a deep spiritual connection with the Divine or God is one that will compel and inspire us to make decisions that are as good for others as they are for ourselves. A love that is even deeper and greater than this will cause us to make decisions that are good for others even if they are not as good for ourselves. "Jesus laid down his life for us" is how the author of John describes such a love.

Are the politicians and governments at all levels throughout Canada making decisions that are as good for others as they are for themselves, making decisions that are good for themselves more than for others, or making decisions that are good for others more than themselves? Are the scientific and medical advisors to these governments giving advice that is good for themselves, good for others, or good for as many people as possible? Are we making decisions in our own daily lives that are primarily good for us, or as concerned about the good of others as our own good, or possibly even making decisions that are good for others even if it causes us to experience pain or suffering in some way?

There are a number of potentially divisive issues that are before our nation, other nations, and the world at the present time. This week, our Federal government delivered their budget which will likely end up helping a lot of Canadians but also misses the mark on helping other Canadians. In the United States, the trial of the police officer who knelt on the neck of George Floyd took place as North Americans continue to experience the reality of racism. In Europe, the gathering of Russian military on the border of Ukraine has left many Europeans anxious, especially Ukrainians who may have differing opinions on disputed territories in Ukraine. There are so many divisive issues before us that I wonder sometimes how we humans manage to hang on to hope in the midst of such uncertainty.

There are also many potentially divisive issues that exist in our personal lives that we face on a regular basis. Workplaces may be divided by the safety protocols that are in place by employers and management with some employees thinking they are too rigorous and other employees thinking they are not sufficient. Educators may be divided over government mandated educational programs and methods with some teachers, students, and parents for them and some against them. Within families, spouses and siblings may be divided over family rules, both spoken and unspoken, leading to frustration and anger that may end up causing harm to some or all of those family members.

Potentially divisive issues are always before us and always will be. That's a given. What we need to do is learn how to better handle such divisive issues so that all those

involved can do better and be better. I think the advice given by the author of John's letter, drawing on the example of Jesus, is the answer we need. It is clear, concise, and easy to understand.

“We ought to lay down our lives for one another!”

Now, I'm not suggesting that we should go out and die for another person, although I do wonder whether Jesus would make that request of us in certain situations. What I am suggesting is that we should go out and make sacrifices for other people if we hope to find positive answers to some of those divisive issues. Doing so will provide us with a greater possibility of good outcomes for everyone involved than if we refuse to make any sacrifices for others. And when both parties in the divisive issue are willing to make sacrifices for the other, a good or much better result is almost guaranteed.

I would like to use an example I am well familiar with, although this example is not specific to any one congregation I have served as pastor. In our Lutheran churches in Ontario, there are often situations where two or three congregations band together in some format to call one pastor. This is primarily so they can call a full-time pastor between them instead of each of them calling part-time pastors and the challenges that brings with it. Sometimes this arrangement has worked out very well, as it is in the present situation I find myself in with the three congregations I now serve as pastor. At other times such an arrangement works out okay but not great. At other times the arrangement struggles from the beginning and comes to an end with hurt feelings felt by many of the people in those congregations and often by the pastor as well.

What I have learned through observation and experience is that when the arrangement works out well there is always a willingness, and even desire, by each congregation in the arrangement to make sure that the other congregation's needs and members are looked after as much as their own needs and members are looked after. In other words, each congregation is willing to make sacrifices so that the other congregation does well. When this happens, and occurs without those sacrificing complaining about how much this hurts them or without boasting about how much they have done, amazingly good things happen. However, as soon as one congregation decides to begin looking after its own needs and members before it considers making sacrifices so that

the other congregation's needs and members can be looked after as well, the relationship between the congregation's, and sometimes between the pastor and the congregation's, begins to suffer and fracture.

I hope this example helps all of us to understand and appreciate how important and helpful it is in any relationship that exists for those involved to be willing, and have a desire, to make sure the other person or people in the relationship know that their needs, welfare and happiness are just as important as everyone else's. This applies to marriages, friendships, workplaces, government operations, education and health systems, and anything else you can think of.

Being willing to make sacrifices for the other is so important for healthy, lasting, meaningful, and life-giving relationships to exist. And please remember that any organization, government, business, or family, is only a gathering of people who are in a formal or informal relationship. Without people that organization does not exist.

As we continue to go through this pandemic, as we continue to go to work, church, school and other places, as we continue to be in, and enter into, relationships of any kind, as we continue to look for meaning, happiness, and value in our lives, and as we continue to hope to make a difference and be remembered with love and appreciation when our lives are over, let us be willing "to lay down our lives for one another" so that our hopes become a reality.

