

Just Another Word for Nothing Left to Lose

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the 4th Sunday of Easter, April 24, 1994. Scripture Lessons: Acts 4:5-12; Psalm 23; 1 John 3:16-24; John 10:11-18.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

My son Philip loves good music. I mean really good music - classical music - not this modern stuff - like heavy metal and that kind of music. He loves the classics - Chuck Berry, Little Richard, Bob Dylan. Last week he was listening to a Janis Joplin tape. Now, some of you older people might remember Janis Joplin, probably the best white blues singer that every lived. Unfortunately, she was also a very self-destructive genius. She died of a drug overdose in 1970. Anyway, Philip was listening to one of her songs, "Me and Bobby McGee." It's a great song. One line goes, "Freedom's just another word for nothing left to lose."

Well, that song stuck in my mind. I was working on my sermon - on the text from 1 John 3:16: "We know love by this, that he (Jesus) laid down his life for us - and we ought to lay down our lives for one another." But the words and music of "Me and Bobby McGee" kept swirling round and round in my mind like summer flies. I couldn't get rid of them. But maybe it was God's way of getting through to me because it suddenly occurred to me that love is also just another word for nothing left to lose - at least it was for Jesus.

Jesus lost his life for us, and not just his life - he lost his dignity when he hung up there naked on the cross like a common criminal. Jesus lost his friends who all forsook him and fled. Jesus lost his freedom with his hands and feet nailed fast to the cross. He lost touch with God the Father when he cried out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" He had nothing left to lose. That's

what love *is*. That's what love *does*. Love is just another word for nothing left to lose.

And John says that we ought to have that kind of love. We ought to lay down our lives for one another. Some of us do that literally. I think of Elizabeth Pilenko, a Russian Nun who ministered in France in the years immediately preceding WWII. When the German occupation began she tried to rescue persecuted Jews. She hid Jewish women and children within the walls of her convent. The Gestapo finally discovered what she was up to and they arrested her in 1942. They sent her to the concentration camp at Ravensbruck. In 1945 gas chambers were built in the camp. One day a few dozen prisoners from the women's quarter were selected to enter these new gas chambers. They stood, lined up outside the buildings. One little Jewish girl became hysterical. Elizabeth Pilenko, who had not been selected, came up to her. "Don't be frightened," she said. "Look, I'll take your place." She exchanged places with the little girl and passed through the doors into the gas chambers on Good Friday, 1945. For Elizabeth Pilenko, love was just another word for nothing left to lose.

All of us, though, have lots of things left to lose. Most of us have pretty good health. We have jobs. We have homes. We have clothes. We have friends. We have a little money for recreation. We have many, many of the world's goods. That means that God has given us many resources with which to express our love for brothers and sisters in need. The apostle John says, "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?" The answer goes without saying. It's impossible! God's love does not abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses to help. It's a moral impossibility.

Now, please understand what John is saying. Our worldly goods are nothing to be ashamed of. Our worldly goods are part of God's blessing. There's nothing sinful *per se* about worldly goods. In fact, John was writing to combat that kind of heresy. Heresy is false teaching. The false teaching John was combating had several features. False teachers were saying: (1) Worldly goods are evil. Material things are evil. Even flesh and blood, our material bodies are evil – something to be ashamed of. (2) Jesus wasn't a real man because real people have flesh and blood bodies and God would never get involved in sinful matter. Jesus was a phantom. You couldn't touch him. He wasn't a flesh and blood person. (3)

Christians and the church shouldn't be concerned about material things because material things are sinful. We should be concerned about peoples' souls, not their bodies. We should be concerned about peoples' spiritual needs, not their material needs. Now that heresy is still with us today, friends.

Here's how John responded to that heresy. He proclaimed that Jesus was a real flesh and blood human being. "We have looked at him and touched him with our hands" John says in the opening verses of his letter. The very God who created the heavens and the earth became a flesh and blood human being in Jesus Christ. God got tangled up with this material world. God took upon God's own self our own flesh and blood. God, in Christ, knows what it's like to be hungry. God, in Christ,

knows what it's like to be homeless. God is concerned about hunger and homelessness because God's been through it all. God lost all the prerogatives of being God to come down here and get all tangled up in matter and flesh and blood. God is concerned about material worldly things as well as spiritual things and God wants the Church to be as well.

When I was in college I dated a girl whose father owned a huge cranberry industry in Massachusetts - a very wealthy man. She invited me to come up their to Plymouth, Massachusetts for a week-end and meet her parents. She and her dad picked me up at the bus station in Boston and drove me down to Plymouth. As we neared their mansion we passed a nice looking two story white frame home that sat about 20 feet from the road. As we passed that house Mr. Talcott said, "I think I own that house." And I thought, "He *thinks* he owns that house? How many houses does he have? He must have so many that he's not sure which ones are his. Anybody who has that many houses probably has too many."

I thought of that incident last week when I cleaned out my basement. I didn't realize I had so many things that I didn't know about. All kinds of things that would be useful to somebody but which I've never used and probably will never use and yet I hold on to them. John tells us that if we have the worlds goods we should be sharing them with our brothers and sisters who need them.

Years ago, when I was about five or six years old, I had cousins who lived on a farm south of West Chester. My cousin, Helen, and her husband, Sam, along with their children lived in a big old ramshackled farmhouse. He didn't own the house.

He was a tenant farmer. One night that old farmhouse burned to the ground and my cousins lost all their worldly goods except for the clothes on their backs. They came and lived with us for awhile until they could get back on their feet.

My mom and dad seemed to be really happy to have our cousins stay with us. My cousin, Helen, helped my mom out in the kitchen and with the cleaning and laundry. My cousin, Sam, planted a garden and grew vegetables for all of us. I was less happy. I wasn't used to sharing anything with anybody. I resented these country cousins coming in and taking over my house. I had to share my bedroom. Share my toys. Share my clothes. I didn't like it. I didn't like it one bit. I said to my mom privately, "Why do they have to stay with us?" And she said, "They don't have anyplace else to stay, and besides, they're family." My mom didn't quote 1 John 3:17 but I got the message. "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?" Families love one another. Families don't just talk love, they love in deed and in truth. Real love shares and gives until their's nothing left to lose.

This came home to me in a very real way this week. Charlie Hatfield's house burned down in Coatesville last week. Charley is one of the singers in the group our sexton, Clyde Prigg, sings in. Charley is the light skinned black fellow who sings the high, falsetto parts. Charley has a wife and several children. They lost everything in the fire. Charley, his wife and kids are our brothers and sisters. They're family. I'm sure that if we all got together and shared our worldly goods we could supply Charley and his family with their needs until they get back on

their feet.

This is how we know that we're from the truth - when we who have this world's goods and see a brother or sister in need, we don't refuse to help. Religious experiences are great to have but that's not how we know that we're from the truth. Believing the right things about Jesus and salvation are important but that's not how we know we're from the truth. This is how we know - when we love in deed and in truth. "This is God's commandment, that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us. All who obey his commandments abide in him, and he abides in them. And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit that he has given us."

Let us pray: God of all power, you called from death our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep. Send us as shepherds to rescue the lost, to heal the injured, and to feed one another with knowledge and understanding; through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.