

"Remain in My Love"

A sermon preached by the Revd. Theodore S. Atkinson on the Sixth Sunday of Easter, May 12, 1985, at Knox Presbyterian Church.

"My commendment is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends." --John 15¹²⁻¹³.

I think I would have liked to have known Billie Hill. His name appeared in a newspaper. It wasn't in the headlines-- the headlines were filled with the names of politicians. It wasn't on the sports page. He didn't score any baskets or hit any home runs. It was in that section of newspaper where people sometimes put in little notices in memory of loved ones. There were only ten words about him. This is what the notice said:

**HILL -- Memories of Billie.
He loved his neighbors as himself.**

There are two ways of laying down your life for your friends. We usually think of some-one *dying* to save a friend. A mother dashes into a blazing house to save her child. But you can lay down your life and go on *living*. A poor mother may work all her life as a domestic in the home of a rich person to keep her family together after her husband leaves her. This kind of laying down one's life calls for more than momentary heroism; it calls for day by day loyalty lasting months and years. It sounds as if Billie Hill laid down his life for his friends in this second way. Day by day, year by year, he loved his neighbors as himself.

Billie Hill's memorial was in a daily paper which is read to-day and thrown into the waste-paper basket tomorrow. But there are other memorials which are erected to last for a nation's history. I think of two in particular. The first one was set up near the South Pole. It commemorates

the love of Captain Lawrence Oates. He was one of the members of a British expedition to the South Pole led by Captain Hugh Falcon Scott. On the 17th of January 1912, after a terrible journey over the snow and ice of Antarctica five members of the expedition reached the South Pole. They had hoped to be the first to reach the pole but found that a Norwegian team had beaten them. Disappointed, they began their 900 mile return journey, facing snow, wind and temperatures that hit 50 degrees below zero. One of the five died as a result of a fall. Only four remained; ~~Scott, Wilson, Oates and Atkinson~~. It was imperative that they reach a depot where food and fuel had been stored. But their progress was slowed by Captain Oates whose feet were badly swollen with frostbite. Oates realized that they would never reach the depot going at his slow pace. He begged his companions to leave him, but they refused.

They became marooned in their tent. A blizzard raged outside. Oates knew he had to make a decision. He dragged himself to the door. Looking back he said to his three companions, "I'm just going outside and may be some time." They never saw him again. Captain Oates laid down his life for his friends. And in recognition of his sacrifice there's a memorial in Antarctica which reads: "Hereabouts died a very gallant gentleman... In March 1912, returning from the Pole, he walked willingly to his death in a blizzard, to try to save his comrades beset by hardships."

The second memorial is in the heart of London. Thousands of people pass it everyday. When Kay and I were in England in 1977 it was one of the landmarks that I didn't want to miss. It was put up years ago with pennies collected in factories, mills and mines by the many friends for whom this man had laid down his life. He laid down his life, not in a sudden act of heroism like that of Oates in Antarctica, but in a life-time of

political activity in which he worked for the welfare of his friends. Among those friends were seven-year-old children who worked fourteen, fifteen and even sixteen hours a day.

His name was Antony Ashley Cooper, better known as Lord Shaftesbury, and his memorial is the statue of Eros erected in Piccadilly Circus (Eros is a Greek word for love). Some of you may be familiar with the life of Lord Shaftesbury; most of you may not be. Let me tell you briefly about him. Lord Shaftesbury was the foremost lay-leader of the Evangelical wing of the Church of England in the 19th Century. Near the end of his life he said, "I do not think that in the last forty years I have lived one conscious hour that was not influenced by the thought of our Lord's return." Motivated by the thought of Christ's return to judge the ~~living and the dead he laid down his life for the rights and welfare of the~~ children and workers oppressed by the industrial revolution.

So then, here are two examples of people who laid down their lives for their friends. Captain Oates who laid down his life in a moment of heroism and Lord Shaftesbury who laid down his life in a lifetime of service for the poor and weak and oppressed.

But there is another person who laid down his life for his friends and another memorial that's far older than any I've mentioned this morning. Jesus laid down his life for his friends in both of these ways. He laid down his life in a lifetime of healing and the preaching of the gospel of peace. He laid down his life on the cross to reconcile the world to his Father in heaven.

The memorial of his love for us is found in the Sacrament of Holy Communion. We go back and back again to this ancient memorial. But there's one thing about it that's different from any other memorial. I

read the memorial of Billie Hill but I never met him. I might travel to the South Pole to see the memorial of Captain Oates but I wouldn't meet him. Kay and I stood at the statue of Eros in Piccadilly Circus but we didn't see or meet Lord Shaftesbury. But here, this morning, at this memorial of our Lord's death, we actually see and feel and touch the living and risen Christ. In faith we feed upon him so that he becomes one with us and we with him. He's alive and present to give us some of his courage and strength

and love so that we also may be able to lay down our lives for our friends; *lay them down in a life-time of service; lay them down, if necessary, in a moment act of heroism.*

This week we celebrated the fortieth anniversary of the end of WWII in Europe. I watched several graphic documentaries of the death camps in Germany. And I was reminded once more of how a person who feeds daily in faith upon the Lord Jesus Christ becomes so much like Christ in their

love for others. On this mother's day, I think of Mother Maria (Elizabeth

Pilenko). She was never married. She never physically bore children. But

she was a mother in the faith for many men and women and a ^{Russian} ~~Roman~~

^{Orthodox} ~~Catholic~~

nun. Because she fed daily upon the Lord Jesus Christ in faith she

was able to live and love and die as Jesus did. A refugee herself, she was ^{laid down her}

life in years of service on behalf of

~~a friend~~ of Russian refugees in Paris in the years between the world wars.

Later she offered refuge to Jews and found herself in the concentration

camp at Ravensbruck. After two and half years the day came when a few

dozen women were lined up outside the gas chambers. One girl chosen for

death became hysterical. Mother Maria who had not been selected for the

death chamber, came up to her. "Don't be frightened," she calmly said, "I'll

take your turn." And with that she passed through the doors of the gas

chamber. The hysterical girl lived, Mother Maria died. Like Jesus, she

showed the full extent of her love by laying down her life for her friends.

We can't begin to obey the commands of Christ or love each other as

he has loved us unless we remain in his love; unless we come in faith over and over again to him, the risen Christ, to feed upon him and to be strengthened daily. We cannot come too often to ^{This memorial,} the Table of the Lord because it reminds us that unless we feed upon Christ in prayer daily and daily commit our ways to him we are lost; we will not have the resources to overcome the world; his commands will become burdensome to us; our lives will not bear fruit that will last into eternal life; *we will not have the strength to lay down our lives out of love for others.*

Draw near in faith to Christ now and every day of your lives. You draw near to Christ, not by raising your hand or walking down an aisle in response to an altar call. You can draw near to Christ now, where you are, in prayer. Speak to Christ in your hearts. In his presence and before the Holy Table resolve now truly and honestly to turn from your sins and turn ~~to Christ in faith. By faith, receive the Lord Jesus Christ and feed upon him.~~

In the strength that he gives you resolve now to love your neighbors. Resolve now that you fully intend to follow the commandments of Christ and to walk in his ways.

Let us pray: Most merciful God, we confess that we have sinned against you in thought, word, and deed, by what we have done, and by what we have left undone. We have not loved you with our whole heart; we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves. We are truly sorry and we humbly repent. For the sake of your Son Jesus Christ, have mercy on us and forgive us; that we may delight in your will, and walk in your ways, to the glory of your Name. Amen.

I acknowledge my dependence upon a sermon entitled "Greater Love" preached by the Reverend Dr. Bernard E. Jones, Cheadle Hulme Methodist Church which appeared in The Expository Times, October 1976, Volume LXXVIII, No. 1, pp. 26ff.