

Sermon – Sunday May 15, 2022

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The Gospel today is filled with churchy words, such as glorify. Glorify was the word John always used to refer to Jesus's completion of his earthly ministry – the fulfillment of what He was called to do. Jesus loved us so much that he was willing to die for us. That death was the completion of what he was called to do. As hard as it may be to grasp, that crucifixion was when God was seen most clearly in Jesus because it was the time when Jesus demonstrated His love for us most perfectly.

When Jesus commands his disciples to love, He calls them to love as He loves. He is calling them to be willing to give up things they love or want so that they can help others. Jesus commands us to do the same thing. He commands us to do whatever is necessary – even giving up something we love or want – to help others. We fulfill God's call to us when we do this, and God is seen most clearly in us.

We find sacrificial love to be complicated sometimes. We want to cling to things we find comfortable or that we love. For example, we cling to pride or let fear overtake love in our decisions. Or someone does something wrong to us, and we cling to that resentment like a security blanket. We don't want to give up that resentment so that we can truly love that person. Sometimes we compete with others for what we see as a scarce prize – whether it's the last doll on sale at the store, the last parking place, or a job promotion. Our desire for that prize overtakes our love, and we have to have it, even if it somehow injures the other person.

On the other hand, as humans, we can sometimes love as Jesus did – even if just for a little while. In those times, God is most visible in us.

I think of a parent's love for their child. If giving up their own lives were necessary to save their child, most parents would give up their own lives. We love our children as Jesus loved us. God is visible in us when we love our children in this way. We fulfill God's call for us when we love our children.

Or, consider Aaron Salter. Aaron was a Tops security guard yesterday in a Buffalo store. He confronted the gunman and even shot at him. Unfortunately, the gunman was wearing body armor and instead of being injured himself, fired back at Salter and killed him. Salter loved others as Jesus loves us. God shone through in Salter at that moment.

Or consider, Arland D. Williams Jr. Arland was a bank examiner for the Federal Reserve. He was initially one of six survivors aboard Air Florida Flight 90 that crashed into the Potomac River on takeoff in 1982. He helped the five other passengers escape the sinking plane before he himself died, passing the lifeline to them instead of taking it himself. Arland Williams gave up his life so that others might live. Arland loved these five people as Jesus loves us. God was visible in Arland Williams as he helped those five people survive.

Consider James Shaw Jr, a Waffle House employee in 2018 in Nashville. He rushed an active shooter and managed to steal his rifle, getting shot himself. The shooter had managed to kill four people before Shaw got his opportunity to rush, but authorities say the death toll would have been higher had Shaw not gotten the rifle. Shaw lived and recovered. He loved the other people in the Waffle House just as Jesus loves us. God was visible in James Shaw as he sacrificed his own safety to benefit others.

James Shaw, Aaron Salter, and Arland Williams are what the secular world calls "heroes." They are ordinary people who, when given the opportunity, demonstrated great love for others. We may have an opportunity like this sometime, but we also have small opportunities to love others every day.

Currently, our country and communities seem to be in a time of great divisiveness. We are divided over vaccines and masks. We are divided over whether Blue Lives Matter or Black Lives Matter. Those who may have had abortions are at odds with those opposed to abortion. Jesus's commandment to us is the same. We are to love those on other sides of the issue. We love those who wear their masks and those who don't. We love those who are vaccinated and those who aren't. We love those who protest against police actions and those who protest in favor of the police. We love those who have had abortions and those who think abortion should be a crime. We don't have to agree, but we are called to love. When we love, we reflect God. God shines through us, and we fulfill God's call to us.

We can forgive others and be willing to relinquish that comfortable resentment. Instead, we can withhold judgment of another and love them just the way they are.

Jesus commanded his disciples and us to love as He loved. That's a tall order, and it's also our calling as followers of Jesus. We love, and God's glory shines through us.