

Loving God, we thank you for the gift of love and presence. Remain in this moment and speak to our hearts. Amen.

Today's passage is one of those passages that is just nice to listen to. It seems to hit all the right notes – inspiring, encouraging and challenging all mixed together. Straight to the point, powerful phrases that seem to get to the heart of our faith. “let us love not in word and speech, but in truth and action;” ... “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 to help?” I mean really... does it get much better than that?

One would never guess what bookends this beautiful piece of text. Wanna know? Well in the preceding passage the writer of this letter references Cain and Able which leads to a pronouncement that “all who hate a brother or sister are murderers...” yikes. Wanna know what awaits us on the other side of this text? ... Oh you know - the antichrist. Ta Da!

Not exclusively in content, but also in form, this passage of Scripture takes us on a wild ride that mirrors the ups and downs of life. From the highs of our best intentions to the lows of our greatest fears and worst selfish impulses. This week in our country we found ourselves yet again on this rollercoaster of highs and lows. On Tuesday alone we swept from the high of a just verdict of guilty for the murder of George Floyd to the heartbreaking, devastating low at news of the death of 16 year old Ma'Khia Bryant. Highs and lows. The writer of this letter knew intimately what it was to be human.

This writer, who refers to themselves as “The Elder” - in knowing the highs and lows of what it is to live a human life points us all back to the ultimate life – that of Jesus the Christ.

In today’s passage we are reminded of a bedrock teaching of the faith “We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us – and we ought to lay down our lives for one another.” I would wager that even the most casual of Christians has heard some version of this line before and is familiar this strand of atonement theology. That Jesus, in his death, became the sacrificial lamb who took upon himself the sins of the entire world, making us “clean” to stand before God. Hearing again this refrain about Jesus laying down his life after consuming centuries of this particular atonement theology easily gives way for us to conclude that the focus here and forever should be on how Jesus had to die to save us all.

But friends the writer here doesn’t say that Jesus had to die, rather he says that Jesus laid down his life. I too have long been under the assumption that the sacrifice of Jesus was always just about his death and how he died... but that’s such a narrow view of everything that Jesus taught, of the life he lived and of what he brought to the world. There are many ways in which Jesus laid down his life, which led to and culminated in his death – but friends, make no mistake the sacrifice of Jesus cannot be pointed easily to one moment, arguably the worst moment of his life. All throughout his ministry, Jesus was in the business of laying down his life.

In his Book “Zealot: The life and times of Jesus of Nazareth,” author and religious scholar Reza Aslan recreates for the modern reader the world

in which Jesus lived. He writes “Jesus was not the only miracle worker trolling through Palestine healing the sick and casting out demons. This was a world steeped in magic and Jesus was just one of untold number of diviners, dream interpreters, magicians and medicine men who wandered Judea and Galilee...” After giving examples of other healers and exorcists who were contemporaries of Jesus he writes “It is worth noting that Jesus never exacted a fee for his services. Magicians, healers, miracle workers, exorcists – these were skilled and fairly well paid professions in 1st Century Palestine.”

At reading this I stopped in my tracks. No one had ever told me this bit about Jesus. How could this part have been missing from the story? Jesus was giving away for free what could’ve been his meal ticket out of poverty. Jesus in healing wasn’t simply just healing people, though that would’ve been enough... Jesus was also making the world a more just and equitable place by making healing and wholeness accessible to the masses who ordinarily would not have been able afford it. This is no small detail. Jesus in his life, more so even than in his death was showing God’s saving action in the world.

In reflecting on what else made Jesus distinct from other miracle workers, Aslan goes on further to say “It is not simply that Jesus’s work is free of charge, or that his healings do not always employ a magician’s methods. It is that Jesus’ miracles are not intended as an end in themselves. Rather his actions serve a pedagogical purpose; [...] a means of conveying a very specific message to the Jews. [...] By connecting his miracles with Isaiah’s prophecy, Jesus is stating in no uncertain terms that the year of the Lord’s favor, [] which the prophet’s predicted has finally arrived. God’s reign has begun.” In Scripture Jesus

says in both Matthew and Luke *“If by the finger of God I cast out demons, then surely the Kingdom of God has come upon you.”* Aslan continues *“Jesus’ miracles are thus the manifestation of God’s kingdom on Earth. It is the finger of God that heals the blind, the deaf, the mute – the finger of God that exorcises the demons. Jesus’ task is simply to wield that finger as God’s agent on earth.”*

It took a Muslim religious scholar, a former Evangelical Christian who no longer ascribes to the view that Jesus is the Son of God to teach me this extraordinary truth about the life of the one I hold most dear. Which makes this learning all the more significant for me honestly. The pendulum is swinging for many Christian scholars and many Christian believers. No longer do we just have to accept that an atonement theology that glorifies a gruesome violent death at the hands of the state, as the pinnacle of God’s saving moment for humanity. Nope, that’s not really going to cut it. Jesus knew the heart of God in his life, not primarily in his death. Jesus wielded the finger of God in life. In life. And while alive he gave life to scores of people free of charge because that’s the heart of God. Jesus showed the nature of God in the way he lived his life and it was not violent, it was not exploitive, or self-serving. It was generous, self-sacrificial. Jesus didn’t just lay down his life solely by dying – that’s a misinterpretation of the readings and of his life. Jesus laid down his life each day by choosing the common interests of humanity over the interests of himself. And that my friends is why we look to him as the Perfecter of our Faith. Because he got it. He was it. He lived God’s love so boundlessly and wanted the rest of humanity to get it. God’s goodness is not exclusive. It is abundant and it should be given away to one and all. Jesus knew that; he lived that. Now let’s go and do likewise. Amen.

