

“We know love by this, that he 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? Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.”

As I was reflecting on these words this last week, I happened to be rereading a book I picked up from my shelf titled, *Are You Running with me Jesus?* It is a book of prayers published in 1965 by an Episcopal Priest named Malcolm Boyd, which became a national bestseller that year. I own an original copy of the book. The prayers read like poetry and are very deep and frank reflections all offered to Jesus. Boyd was an amazing figure in the history of the church and he was one of the Freedom Riders in the early 60's. One of the prayers that he wrote in “Are You Running with Me Jesus?” was written in response to what saw as a Freedom Rider, is titled, “I find it very difficult to pray in this situation” and it reads like this,

“It seems to me we have all prayed a long time about situations like this, yet have done little or nothing to change them. Maybe we thought prayer was magic, Jesus, and decided we didn't need to cooperate actively with you in working for a better world.

What are we to say, Lord, about this family that lives in a wooden shack here on a winding dirt road in Mississippi? The father a [black] laborer, earns less than a thousand dollars a year under the modern slavery of “the plantation system.” The mother is now bearing their seventh child. The family is hungry. As I see it, these persons have no opportunity to break out of the grinding, desperate life in which they have been prisoners since birth.

Lots of well fed, comfortable, middle-class people everywhere are praying for ‘situations’ like this all time. But they don't seem to do enough about changing such situations by altering political and economic facts of life, or helping specific men, women, and children who are victims.

Isn't prayer expressed in actions, Jesus, and isn't real action a form of prayer? Then maybe people in Chicago ought to pray for ‘situations’ like this by getting involved in Chicago community organization efforts and in the lives of Chicago victims; perhaps people in Boston, London, Sao Paulo, and Johannesburg ought to pray in this way too. And people in Mississippi.

Otherwise, wouldn't it be more honest not to go through the mere motions of praying, Lord? I mean, if we do not intend to offer ourselves and cooperate with you in fighting evil?”

In the epistle from 1 John this morning, we heard compelling words that as apprentices of the Good Shepherd, we ought to lay down our lives for one another. We must not refuse help to others. We who are the Good Shepherds disciples are called to do good work in the world in his name. In the words of Malcolm Boyd, to “offer ourselves and cooperate with you in fighting evil.”

There are wolves in this world that come for us in life. There are wolves in this world that seek to scatter us. That seek to do us harm. God recognizes this. God does not leave us defenseless. God sends a good and caring shepherd into our midst who loves us and who accompanies us through the valley of the shadow of death and leads us into green pastures. Pastures of plenty.

He calls each of us by name. He knows each of us uniquely. He knows our individual needs and makes provision for them.

In the early Church, the very first images of Jesus that we can find are images of Christ the Good Shepherd. We find the images of Jesus the Good Shepherd on the walls of catacomb churches where the oppressed minority Christians would worship in secret. This God

which they worshipped was not a conquering warrior emperor like the Caesars of the Rome. This God that they worshipped was not like the fierce lion God of Mesopotamia, or the lightning-bolt throwing Zeus. This God which the Christians worshipped in secret who was such a threat to the Roman Empire was a humble shepherd. A humble shepherd, unafraid to face the wolf, who laid down his life for his sheep.

This shepherd of peace bears for us a powerful redeeming love. This shepherd of peace calls us forth as his sheep and transforms us into shepherds who go with him after his lost sheep.

Jesus is the great seeker. He seeks after each of us. He offers us comfort and care in the midst of chaos. He loves each and every one of us and offers us rest for our souls. We have a leader who will stop at nothing to seek us out and find us and who shows us the power of love’s perseverance.

One of the early church fathers, Basil of Seleucia wrote in the 5<sup>th</sup> century: “Death held sway until Christ died. The grave was bitter, our prison was indestructible, until the shepherd went down and brought to his sheep, confined there, the good news of their release. His appearance among them gave them a pledge of

their resurrection and called them to a new life beyond the grave. “The Good Shepherd lays down his life for his sheep and so seeks to win their love.””

We are shepherds too. Peter became a shepherd on that beach where the resurrected Jesus commissioned him and said “feed my sheep”. As a symbol of our calling to be shepherds to one another, bishops carry a crozier—which is a shepherd’s staff, a sign that they are the representatives of the great shepherd—a tool designed for rescue.

We have all been rescued by the good shepherd who left the 99 to come find us. We as the good shepherd’s apprentice are called forth to help him in this saving work. Amen.