

## “Lay Down Your Life...”

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John 15:12-13

Sunday, October 25, 2009

I was told this story many years ago. I don't remember anymore who told it to me, and I can't guarantee that I have all the details right, especially the medical ones. But the power of it came back to me in a very moving way last week, and I want to share it with you tonight.

There was a young girl, about four years old. I'll call her Olivia. She had cancer—leukemia, I believe. There had been many doctor appointments and hospitalizations and treatments, but the cancer persisted. One of the doctors told Olivia's parents that he had been having some success with blood transplants from siblings. He said that he believed that their daughter's only hope for survival would involve draining the blood from her body and replacing it with some of her brother's healthy blood, in hopes that it would regenerate in her body as it would in her brother's, so that she would be as healthy as he was.

The parents talked it over with Olivia's seven-year-old brother, Jonathan. They explained that the doctors would put his blood into Olivia, that there would be needles and some pain and it would take several hours, but that this might save his sister's life. Jonathan thought about it for a while, and then he said yes, he would do it if this could save Olivia.

He was awake for the procedure. They wheeled his little sister beside him. The father stood over Olivia's bed. The mother stayed at Jonathan's side, offering words of comfort and encouragement. About an hour into it, Jonathan looked up at his mother, blinked back a few tears, and asked, “How soon before I die?”

Just hours before his death, Jesus uttered these words to his disciples, recorded in the fifteenth chapter of the Gospel of John: “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends.”

Jesus understood what was coming. Jonathan misunderstood—but that doesn't change the fact that he believed that the doctors were going to take all of his blood and that he was giving up his life to save his little sister.

In some parts of the world, people are confronted daily with life-and-death choices. In some places, following Jesus is a decision that means risking one's life. But for most of us, the question of whether we're willing to give up our lives for our friends, or our faith, isn't something we confront regularly—if at all.

The first—and last—time I remember asking that question was twenty-six years ago, when I was headed to the war zones of Nicaragua to help establish a peace witness there. I had decided, along with many other Christians in this country, that my life wasn't worth more than the lives of the Nicaraguan children, women, and men that were being destroyed in a war sponsored and funded by our government. I had pondered and prayed about it, but, truthfully, I didn't really believe that I was going to lose my life in Nicaragua. I was in my twenties then—what did I know of death?

I was actually, secretly, a little bit glad that our Witness for Peace team came under mortar fire on our drive back to Managua—it made for a much more exciting story to tell back home. I haven't ever truly faced the question of what it would mean to have such love—the kind of love for a friend that Jesus has for us—that I would be willing to surrender my life.

Just shy of two weeks ago, on Monday morning, Kiran Sigmon's mother, Marian—who lives across the driveway from me at Swan Mountain Farm—got up about 6:30 to let the cat out. She heard Rhonda, one of our two llamas, screaming. Kiran's dad, Bob, grabbed a flashlight and ran toward the pasture. He got close enough to the bear that had hold of Rhonda to see the iridescent green in its eyes. He chased it away with some rocks.

Rhonda was mortally wounded. A neighbor who is a veterinarian was called, and he came and pronounced the obvious: Rhonda could not survive and needed to be relieved of her terrible suffering.

A bear-hunting neighbor told us that the bear would likely return that night, or the next. It didn't. But Brie, our other llama, and our seven sheep certainly feared that it would. They stayed hidden up in the high pasture until Wednesday morning.

I went out that morning about 9:30 to hang some laundry, and I was stunned and deeply moved by what I saw in the pasture. The sheep had lined up—one behind the other up the hillside, with Brie in front of them—facing the fence beyond which lay Rhonda's body. They stood like that, still and solemn, for over an hour. Kiran later reported that she had seen them like that when she left for work that morning around seven o'clock. For over three hours, in the manner of sheep, Rhonda's friends paid homage to her.

Bears are herbivores, surviving on acorns and berries. They don't generally go after livestock. But occasionally a hungry bear loses its way and does desperate, un-bear-like things. Even then, a bear typically knows not to go after an animal larger than itself.

Swan Mountain Farm is, as Bob often says, "on the edge of the wilderness." We sit on the boundary of the large Pisgah National Forest. Rhonda and Brie have been good guard animals, and raising a ruckus and sounding an alarm has usually been enough to scare away a bear or coyote or cougar. But it wasn't this time. What we are convinced of is that the bear was going after a sheep, and Rhonda intervened, sacrificing herself to protect her flock.

We buried Rhonda in the lower end of the garden. Mark and Bob and Kiran's Uncle Lee did the loving and arduous labor of moving her body and digging the large grave by hand, contending with rain and layers of clay and many rocks. They placed a headstone from among the ones they dug up, and Bob plans to build a rock wall around the grave with the rest. I placed some of the last of Marian's elegant, saucer-sized, bright-yellow and burgundy dahlias by the headstone; other flowers will be planted over the grave in spring.

I walk every day down to Rhonda's grave with my dog, Sophie. I look up at Swan Mountain, now bursting with red and gold foliage and often draped these mornings in mist, and I give thanks for this beautiful, noble creature who has taught us all something about courage and compassion.

We are not likely to face in our lives the drama, and trauma, of a bear marauding in the night, threatening our friends and forcing us to ask if we're willing to give up our life to save them. But Rhonda's sacrifice has led me into some deep pondering of a few questions these past two weeks.

### ***What, and whom, am I willing to die for?***

What, and whom, *am* I willing to die for? And if I never have to confront that question in the flesh, then what, and who, am I choosing to live for? Who do I love with the kind of sacrificial love Jesus invites us to?

I don't think it's an exaggeration to say that Rhonda exhibited Christ-like grace. A few chapters before tonight's passage, in the tenth chapter of John, Jesus told his friends, "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for his sheep...I know my own and my own know me, just as the Abba knows me and I know the Abba. And I lay down my life for the sheep...No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord."

Rhonda was a good shepherd. She laid down her life for the sheep. So let us learn from her noble sacrifice and the mystery of the homage her friends paid to her. And as we move tonight toward the table of blessing and communion, may we also remember the sacrifice of the One who loved us enough to die for us. The One who invites us to love one another with that same passion and courage and mercy and grace.

Amen.