

## *To Lay Down One's Life*

A Sermon by *the Rev. Dr. Joseph David Stinson*,  
Glen Ridge Congregational Church, Glen Ridge, New Jersey,  
*Preached on the Sixth Sunday of Easter, (17May), 2009.*

Text: John 15:13 “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.” ~Jesus

Of the many remarkable things Jesus told his disciples at the end of his earthly life, this one must be one of the most stirring: “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.”

I have been reading Marcus Luttrell’s Lone Survivor. It is the story about a four-member Navy SEAL team in Afghanistan in 2005.<sup>1</sup> They were inserted onto a mountain near the Pakistani border to capture or kill a notorious al Qaeda-Taliban leader named Sharmak. While the four did reconnaissance on a village below their position, by accident two Afghani goatherds came upon them. The four debated what to do with the two locals, knowing that if they let them go, they might reveal their position to the Taliban. In the end they decided to let them go. They could not bring themselves to kill them and feared they would be put on trial for war crimes if they did so. Within a short time they were attacked by 100 to 200 Taliban soldiers. In the ensuing battle, the SEAL commander, LT Michael Murphy, exposed himself to enemy fire in order to get connectivity to make a call on the team’s satellite phone for help. He lost his life making the call. Two others, Petty Officers Matthew Axelson and Daniel Dietz also were killed. Luttrell escaped through a maelstrom of bullets by rolling down the mountain, sustaining broken vertebrae, cuts and one gunshot wound in his thigh. His enemies kept looking for him but he managed to evade capture until two days later. He had found a mountain stream and was getting his first drink when a group of Afghani villagers found him and took him in. These people were Pashtun tribe members who decided to offer him *lokhay*. *Lokhay* is a 2000 year old concept of hospitality that required the village, if necessary, to defend the guest to the death. In the ensuing week, with the town completely surrounded by Sharmak’s Taliban warriors, they very nearly had to do so. Though I am certain, none of these Pashtuns knew about Jesus’ teaching we read today, this part of Luttrell’s story is in large reason why the story is so compelling. That they were willing to defend this man is astonishing to us. “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.”<sup>2</sup> In the midst of a hostile and alien culture, this small village of Afghans risked their lives to save him. At the moment he was not even a friend. It is a rousing story of tribalism, violence, and the role of God in human affairs. Eventually, Luttrell was rescued by a band of Green Berets and airlifted out. I heard Luttrell speak last year at the Navy Memorial in Washington during a week I was in the capital, around the time his teammate

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<sup>1</sup> Luttrell, Marcus (with Pat Robinson), Lone Survivor, (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 2007).

<sup>2</sup> John 15:13.

LT Murphy received post-humously the Congressional Medal of Honor. This is a very compelling and courageous story with many insights into the complicated struggles our nation currently fights in Afghanistan.

In our own chapel are three stained glass windows in memory of James Dorland, a young man from our church who was killed in the Korean War. One of the windows bears the inscription from our reading today in John: “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.” (John 15:13) Clearly his family saw in this teaching of Jesus an example their son had followed.

The Judaism of Jesus’ time also practiced something very close to *lokhay*. There are numerous examples in the Old Testament, the most famous of which is Abraham’s hospitality to the three angels by the Oaks of Mamre in Genesis 18. Christianity inherited the same principle of hospitality from its parent faith. A famous Christian text teaching this is in Hebrews and refers back to Genesis: “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for some thereby have entertained angels unawares.”<sup>3</sup> Also important is Jesus’ parable of the sheep and goats in Matthew 25 where he taught us that when we offer help to anyone, it is as if we offer it to Jesus. In Christian history St. Benedict took the dominical instruction literally in his *Rule*, insisting monks always give without reservation to anyone who came under the roof of a monastery.

I have been thinking all week as I read about *lokhay* the way in which this idea of putting one’s life on the line for another person is imbedded in the great faiths of the world. For us Christians, our example comes from Jesus who willingly offered his life for our sakes and taught his disciples to practice the same kind of loving sacrifice that he did. While not all acts of love demand this level of sacrifice, it inspires us when we read about such a case.

Love is the reason we happened at all  
And it paid for the damage we done  
And it bought us the freedom to fall into grace  
On our way to our place in the sun.<sup>4</sup>

In these lyrics of Kristofferson’s sad, country song, it is not clear whether the third person plurals—*we*, *us* and *our*—refer to a fellow artist Kristofferson had in mind or the entire human race. But assume the later. Kristofferson’s lyrics speak about love paying for the damage we have done. Given the bloody history of human interaction—in a place like Afghanistan—the idea that there is a love so noble as to atone for the harm humans have done is clearly more than a Hallmark card sentiment. It is not to glamorize violence and death, and certainly does not

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<sup>3</sup> Hebrews 18:2.

<sup>4</sup> Kristofferson, Kris, “*The Last Thing to Go*.” On his 2006 album, *This Old Road*, New West Records.

encourage it. But it makes me consider as a Christian just how serious the love of Jesus is, and the level of love he demands of his followers:

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. You are my friends if you do what I command you....I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.<sup>5</sup>

His love, mirrored in the selfless acts of others—even if the others live in a village 8000 miles away and are of another faith—bought us '*the freedom to fall into grace.*' I wonder if the situation were reversed and the event took place in our country, how many of us would offer hospitality to an Afghani to save his life? Perhaps it will never happen and we will not be asked to give so much for another, but it inspires us when we see it. It ennobles us when we live it. It gives power '*on our way to our place in the sun.*'

End

That You May Love. DOC

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<sup>5</sup> John 15:12-14, 17.