

**“Self-Giving Love”**  
**1 John 3:16-24**  
**Andrew Foster Connors**  
**4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter**  
**May 3, 2009**

In the fire station we sat around in our usual post-training ritual of swapping small talk. Most of us lingered there hoping that a big call might come in enabling us to suit up in the truck on the way, running red lights with the blessing of the law, something volunteers could not do in their own private vehicles. But I enjoyed the conversations there – conversations that I was not used to having in my daily world of suits and ties. One day as we were sitting around doing nothing, one of the young paid firemen said, without expression:

“I dug me a hole in my backyard this weekend with the backhoe. It’s about 6 foot by 12 foot.”

The silence of the group troubled me as I began to think that I must be the only one who had no idea why someone would dig a 6X12 pit in their backyard. A volunteer – a retired man in a plaid shirt and jeans held up by red suspenders, continued to chew on his toothpick, a heavy-set man got up to stretch, another man nodded his head as if to say, “that’s a fine sounding pit.” Finally a young man dared to ask what I had been thinking,

“What’d you dig the hole for?”

The paid fireman crossed his solid arms across his chest leaned back in his chair and offered triumphantly, “Fishin.”

There were many more conversations like this one. What it would take to restore a 57 Chevy. How much land costs had escalated since people from the north started retiring locally. Whether deer meat tasted different when it was killed with the bow or the rifle. Whether motor oil had medicinal qualities.

I relished these conversation because I always learned something new, like how to override the low pressure switch on a Ford Ranger’s air conditioning with a coat hanger, or where to find a good fishing hole, and because I felt humbled to know that there were entire worlds of living and surviving that my privileged education had not prepared me for and never would. But more than that, I felt that if I was trusting my life to these men and one woman I ought to at least know something about them.

One night I found myself among the first on the first hose line in a burning house, just behind the paid lieutenant on the nozzle. We entered through the door and into the inferno, a stream of water plowing through the flame. As we positioned in the center of a main room, the boot of the man on the nozzle suddenly dropped through the floor and we struggled together to bring it back up. Pieces of wood fell from the ceiling and a small ember somehow made its way through the hood on the lieutenant’s neck. He turned the hose on himself to stop the burn and give himself some relief. “You want to take it for awhile?” his muffled yell sounded through his mask and he coached me to the front as we held tight to our line. Just then the chief called us to clear the building and we backed out as the staircase came tumbling down.

Back at the station, early that morning, the thought occurred to me that the same man who dug a 6X12 hole in his backyard for reasons I had not understand, or the backyard mechanic who knew how to override the AC switch on his truck with a coat hanger – men with whom I had so little in common, these were the same people I relied on to keep me alive. I trusted them with my life and they trusted me with theirs. They would probably die for me if it came to that, maybe even die for people they had never met. These people that I knew so little about, whose experiences had been largely different than my own, whose knowledge was largely inaccessible to me, whose lives were so different, these were people who would not think twice in the face of death if that was required of them.

“We know love by this,” John says, “that Christ laid down his life for us”-- and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. This is the definition of love, according to the writer of 1 John. Selfless giving – first received from God – then offered again to a brother or sister in need. Love that is offered not simply in flowery words, but in truth and in action.

And yet I wonder why this kind of love seems only to be celebrated in our culture amid the high drama of military, police, or fire fighter sacrifice. Is it because in these arenas dominated by men, self-giving love occurs only when traditional masculinity cannot be called into question? Military men and women die fighting an enemy; police officers die in the line of fire; fire fighters die *fighting* fires. Self-giving love in our culture seems rarely to be praised except in the context of battle.

Self-giving love, for the Christian, is not supposed to happen only in a fight. It is an ethic for us to live by all of the time. Every time we see a brother or sister in need we are called to self giving love. Every time we hear the cries of those who are hungry we are to self-giving love. Every time we hear victims of war and its brutality we are called to self giving love. Not as an exception to be exercised amid the high drama of life and death, but as a way of living, a routine.

It is that everyday form of self-giving love that is not championed in our culture. If anything it is ridiculed as hopelessly romantic, untenable, even irresponsible.

I was moved to hear Sister Dianna Ortiz speak at the Christian Peace Witness for Iraq this past Wednesday. Sister Ortiz is a nun who taught poor children to read in Guatemala until she was kidnapped and tortured by men she was never allowed to see. “As I improve,” she said, “I have faith, hope and trust again, on my good days. But even on my good days, the smell of cigarette smoke reminds me of the burns the torturers inflicted on me. The sight of a man in uniform reminds me of the Policeman [who was one of the men who tortured me]. I jump if someone runs up behind me, and if someone stands too close or stares at me, I back away. I sleep with the light on. I ask people not to smoke, not to stare, not to talk about torture tactics in front of me, and not to invite me to movies that are violent. ...”<sup>1</sup>

Listening to her testimony I knew that there is a good reason why this ethic of self-giving love sounds so hopelessly unrealistic. Those who give themselves over to this love invariably make themselves vulnerable. They are at the mercy of those who take advantage of vulnerability. They lose a level of protection from people who choose not to live by this same

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<sup>1</sup> quoted to the best of my ability. Sister Ortiz was reading from her autobiographical account.

ethic. “No one ever fully recovers,” she said, “not the one who is tortured, and not the one who tortures. Every time he tortures, the torturer reinforces the idea that we cannot trust one another, and that we cannot trust the world we live in.”<sup>2</sup>

You don’t have to be a victim of torture to know this kind of mistrust. Mistrust that we learn for good reasons, to protect ourselves from the kind of horror that Sister Ortiz experienced in Guatemala. Mistrust that we know passing strangers on the street, walking into a room crowded with people we do not know, or that keeps us from reaching out to people who are in need. We live day in and day out with the idea that we cannot trust one another and we cannot trust the world we live in.

At the same event on Wednesday night, self-described evangelical Tony Campolo didn’t dispute the dangerous world that we live in. and he didn’t make the Christian love ethic easy for any of us. We can’t follow Jesus and try to secure our own future through war he said. Those who heed the call to follow Jesus know that there’s always a risk that you might get crucified. Choose to love means giving up power over other people for a different kind of power. Everybody seems to know that except people in the church, he said.

What I took from Tony Campolo and from Sister Ortiz is that it is impossible to love and to secure our safety at the same time. At least, not the kind of safety that we crave in this life. It is impossible to love without making ourselves vulnerable to hurt and loss. It is impossible to love as freely as Jesus loves without making ourselves vulnerable even to death.

And yet the alternative is to live life always mistrusting each other, always mistrusting the world in which we live, always trying to protect ourselves from the next danger to body or soul. The alternative is to live life in perpetual fear. For Jesus, fear was worse than death. He tried to teach the same to his reluctant disciples.

Jesus left us with a *community* of disciples, in part, because he knew that when we do love like he loved, giving ourselves to brothers and sisters in need, opening our hearts to the pain of the world around us, laying down our lives not as an exception but as a way of life; when we live like that we’re bound to be hurt. Hurt with loss and its attendant grief. Hurt by the pain of betrayal. Hurt by those who respond to love with violence and hate. We are brought together with other people who have decided, like Jesus, that fear and mistrust really is worse than death. That the freedom to love is more than worth the risk.

In the firehouse I learned how to find the courage to risk my life for others when extraordinary circumstances called for it. But in the church I’m trying to learn how to give my life for others all the time. How to give my life over for a hurting world. How to be present to the pain of brothers and sisters in need. How to condition my first reflex to be compassion rather than self-protection. Freed from every anxiety. Freed from every fear. Freed to love like the one who laid down his life for us and rose up to love again.

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<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*