

Acts 4:5-12  
1 John 3:16-24  
John 10:11-18  
Psalm 23

The Fourth Sunday in Easter  
St. Barnabas Bainbridge Island  
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## Liberated From Death to Life

In the classic comic strip *Calvin & Hobbes*, Calvin discovers his activist side when he and his stuffed tiger Hobbes stumble upon a clear-cut in the forest. Calvin exclaims in surprise, “Hey! What happened to the trees here? Who cleared out the woods? There used to be lots of animals in these woods! Now it’s a mud pit!”

Hobbes, anthropomorphically coming to life, notices a nearby sign that reads, “Future site of Shady Acres condominiums.” Upon hearing Hobbes read this aloud, Calvin exclaims in exasperation, “Animals can’t afford condos!”

Filled with righteous indignation, Calvin wants to act. “Where are all the animals supposed to live now that they cut down those woods to put in houses??” he asks sincerely. He then lands upon a rather clever rhetorical question, “By golly, how would *people* like it if animals bulldozed a suburb and put in new *trees*?!?” (emphasis in original)

In the next frame of the comic, Calvin and Hobbes both stare for a moment as the possibilities latent in Calvin’s sharp quip become apparent. In the final frame, we see Calvin and Hobbes in full activist mode, as they search for keys to the nearby bulldozer so that they can head to town to raze some houses and plant trees.

It’s a funny if tragic bit of wit, capturing both the urgency that we must *do something* in the face of overwhelming injustice, and the futility of our frantic flailing that can often feel like mere drops of water in an arid dust bowl. This particular *Calvin & Hobbes* comic is rather pertinent for the Fourth Sunday in Easter 2024, which comes a day before Earth Day, a global observance to draw attention to environmental destruction and the need for robust protection and accountability for the non-human aspects of our island home.

Calvin’s process of thought in the comic, from his discovery of environmental degradation to his apoplexy over the harm done to animals to his decision to act—

*do something*—evokes a question: what does it mean to commit one’s self to a just cause? Calvin recognizes that caring about justice cannot simply involve having feelings or expressing condemnation. It must also involve action, often requiring immense transformation of our presence in the world. We won’t be good stewards of our planet without drastically rethinking our basic practices towards property rights, resource mining, energy consumption, and human reproduction.

Our epistle reading for this Sunday in 1 John is also about what it means to commit ourselves to a just cause—the ultimate just cause, that of following Jesus as our Lord and Savior. The transformation demanded is no less great and our beliefs matter. What Calvin believed about the destruction of the forest directed his action; likewise our belief in Jesus leads us to live a new kind of life.

In 1 John 3.11, we are given the climax or pinnacle of the letter, the new commandment of Christ followers, that “we should love one another.” Earlier, John has described this command as “not a new command but an old one” (2.7), being part of the message of God heard from the beginning of the apostle’s preaching and foreshadowed in the Jewish scriptures and storytelling. Yet he paradoxically goes on to call it “a new command,” because “its truth is seen in him [Christ] and you, because the darkness is passing and the true light is already shining” (v. 8). It’s new because this light is shining in a way it hadn’t before Jesus.

Loving one another certainly sounds like a just cause. Isn’t John simply telling us to be more thoughtful, more compassionate, more tolerant, and that it doesn’t matter so much what we believe? That’s hard to square with John’s insistence that loving one another commits us to some critical pieces of knowledge.

One piece of knowledge is that loving each other is how “we know that we have passed from death to life” (3.13). “Anyone who does not love remains in death,” John warns, revealing that this new command, which is also very old, is totally and utterly transformative. It liberates us from the kind of life that can only be called a remaining-in-death into the true life, eternal life; that is, a life which is deeply rooted in the permanence of God. Such a life is not just a doing, a loving, but a being, a being *in* love, and a knowing, a knowing that we have been liberated from death to life.

Another critical piece of knowledge is how we know what love *is*. John will not abide any of our contemporary nonsense that we all innately know the meaning of love, or that love is whatever feels right in our hearts. No, he insists that we believe the ultimate truth of love because we have witnessed true love in Jesus. “This is how we know what love is,” John writes. “Jesus Christ laid down his life for us” (3.16).

If we are the kind of people who “belong to the truth” and who “set our hearts at rest in the divine presence,” then we have “confidence before God” because “we keep his commands and do what pleases him” (vv.19-22). We commit ourselves to this just cause by obeying what God commands of us, which is both a believing and a doing: “And this is God’s command: to believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and to love one another” (v. 23). The act follows from the belief, because it is only by accepting that Jesus has laid down his life for us that we realize “we *ought* to lay down our lives for our sisters and brothers” (v. 16, emphasis added). We’ve no obligation to lay down our lives if we are not fully believers in Christ laying down his life. John says definitively, “Whoever claims to live in God must live as Jesus did” (2.6). To do that, we must know how Jesus lived!

We get one such glimpse in our Gospel reading from John 10.11-18, in which Jesus presents himself to his disciples as “the good shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep.” Pay close attention to the empowerment of obeying commands. Committing one’s self to a just cause is not simply a matter of deciding what we believe in and doing it, as if our lives have no reference to something outside of ourselves which is making a claim on us. Bishop John A. T. Robinson, in his book *Exploration into God*, says that

integral to any God-statement, at any rate in the Judeo-Christian tradition, is the consciousness of being encountered, seized, held by a prevenient reality, undeniable in its objectivity, which seeks one out in grace and demand and under the constraint of which a [person] finds [themselves] judged and accepted for what [they] truly [are]. (p. 66)

To be related to God is to know ourselves as no longer belonging to ourselves, as being bound to the life and guidance of a love that comes from without. Yet this obedience is true freedom and true life. Notice how Jesus, the very Son, describes his relationship to his Father. His power to take up his life and lay it down comes

as “a command from my Father.” Yet by this command he acts under his own power, out of his own freedom. If he lays down his life, it isn’t because anyone forces him to do so. “I lay my life down of my own accord,” Jesus testifies.

Returning to 1 John, we see that just as Jesus did what his Father commanded, so “the one who keeps God’s commands lives in God” (3.24). Following Jesus and laying down our lives in love as he did is an act of free response to God’s love.

But now comes the difficult part. Loving one another is not just a command about how we *are* to treat others, but also a command about how we are *not* to treat others. “Anyone who claims to be in the light but hates a sister or brother is still in the darkness,” John writes (2.9). We have not passed from life to death if we still hate others.

John goes further, writing that “anyone who hates a sister or brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life residing in them” (3.15). John illustrates this by saying that we cannot be like Cain, “who belonged to the evil one and murdered his brother” (v. 12). And if it sounds extreme to equate hate with murder, let us remember that Jesus taught the very same thing in the Sermon on the Mount (cf. Matt. 5.21-22).

Finally, John says, “If anyone has material possessions and sees a sister or brother in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in that person? Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth” (3.17-18). Our belief in the just cause of God’s love will result in lives of both action *and* truth, or the love of God is not in us.

Obviously John is here thinking of our human neighbors and siblings. But as we reflect on Earth Day, perhaps it would be most faithful to the just cause of Christ to expand John’s teaching outward, to the fauna and the flora, to the water cycle and the mineral deposits. When young Calvin stumbled upon that clear-cut in the forest and imagined some housing development filling the void, he saw our animal neighbors left homeless and he had pity on them. Calvin sought to love them, with humorous naivety, in action and in truth.

As Christ makes us into people who live in the light and not in darkness, people who know and not just feel what love is, people who lay down our lives for others, we must ask ourselves: would the creatures we share this earth with describe our actions as those of love or hate? Would they describe our lives as reflections of eternal life or death? Would they describe us as people who lay down our lives for all creatures great and small?

There is one more scene in the story about Calvin and his stuffed tiger Hobbes discovering the clear-cut in the forest. Upon realizing that his plan to bulldoze the neighborhood isn't exactly feasible, Calvin wanders through the cut meditating on how many hundreds of years it took to grow that forest, with only a week needed to cut it down. Calvin anxiously forecasts, "After they build new houses here, they'll have to widen the roads and put up gas stations. And pretty soon this whole area will just be a big strip. Eventually, there won't be a nice spot left anywhere."

The final frame shows Calvin and Hobbes walking into the distance, the sag of defeat on their shoulders. Calvin asks, "I wonder if you can refuse to inherit the world."

Hobbes replies, "I think if you're born, it's too late."

I feel deep sympathy with Calvin's open question. And yet, if Hobbes is right that all who are born have already inherited the world, how much more so for those of us who are born again?

If Jesus truly is the Good Shepherd, then whereas our birth means we have no say in inheriting the world, Jesus freely inherits the world by laying down his life for the flock. The sheep know his voice and he knows our voices. There are other sheep from outside the flock, and they will be brought in to make one flock under one shepherd.

Elsewhere in the New Testament we see the cosmic character of Christ inheriting the whole world. The Letter to the Hebrews opens with the declaration that God's Son is appointed heir of all (1.2). The Letter to the Colossians declares that in Jesus God is reconciling the whole universe (1.19). God in Christ has assumed responsibility for everything. God has taken up the just cause for our sakes. That frees us to be creatures. To be finite, incapable beings who have been graciously grafted into Christ, so that we can participate in his responsibility. If we are in him, then we are truly able to love one another. We can take up the just cause without futility. For anyone who loves as Christ has loved no longer remains in death, but has life, life to the fullest possible extent, eternal life.

In Christ, we no longer fear taking up the just cause of inheriting the world.