Christians have long had a bad habit of contrasting love and law in our faith as a way of claiming superiority to Judaism. Jews live by their love of law, the saying goes, Christians by the law of love. But what if at heart, they are one and the same?

Sure, the love of law can turn into a cold legalism that ends either in self-righteous elitism or in self-defeating despair. But that isn't unique to Jews. We have all known people who confess Jesus as the Christ and are guilty of this very thing. As for the law of love, yes, love is at the bottom the nature of God and all reality. But this love can be distorted too, either by doing whatever your heart tells you to without regard to what is right by your neighbor, or by turning faith into some romantic notion that is little more than Jesus is my boyfriend and I love him so much.

In our Gospel text today from John, Jesus links love and law, saying that if we are to abide in him as he abides in his Father's love, we will keep his commandments. And the chief commandment he gives is that we love one another as he has loved us.

The commandments were gifts of love from God to Israel. They were not burdens to bear that would rob people of the joy of life they might know if they were free of them. They were directions from God about how to find freedom and joy.

Rabbi Simlai, in the third century, identified 613 commandments in the Torah, the first five books of the Bible. These mitzvot in the Hebrew are headlined by the Decalogue, the Ten Words or the Ten Commandments. But there are altogether, he noted, 365 negative commandments in Scripture corresponding to the days of the year, and 248 positive commandments that equate to the number of major bones and organs of the human body. There's something to not do each day, and then there are things to do that make up who we are, he said. This was seen as a means of abundant grace for the Israelites. The revelation to Moses bound them together as a people. These commandments...
were a flashlight in a dark world—they shined a way forward. They were and are unifying and defining for the people of God.

So, what unifies and defines us Christians as people of God who are not bound by these 613 commandments? We see that way here, I think, as we obey the summarizing commandment of Jesus that we love one another. In other places in Christian Scripture, we hear Paul say that loving our neighbor as ourselves is the sum total of the law, and Jesus tells us in the Sermon on the Mount to love our enemies, not just those who love us back. But here Jesus says that there is no greater love than to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.

Jesus himself would soon do just that, laying down his life on the cross. We tend to think of that in grand cosmic terms, as the Son of God who gave himself up for the sinful world in order that the world might be saved. But here Jesus takes us to the heart of it all. He tells us that what’s going on in his self-sacrificing love is an expression of his devotion for his friends. It is more than a warm feeling of friendship they might have shared around a campfire in Galilee, singing Kumbaya and probably roasting marshmallows, don’t you know?!

Instead, it’s more like the way the writer Frederick Buechner describes it: In the Christian sense, love is not primarily an emotion but an act of will.1

While I have never served in the military, I have heard time and again from those who have that the reason they fight is not so much for an abstract principle of freedom or democracy, or even for love of country. They say that what motivates them on the battlefield are their brothers beside them.

This is borne out by the fact that more Congressional Medals of Honor in this country have been handed out to those who have fallen on live grenades to protect their fellow soldiers than any other act of self-sacrifice. These people risked their own lives for the sake of those who shared their mission and cause. It’s above and beyond the call of duty; it’s an act of love.

Like U.S. Marine Corporal Jason Dunham. In 2004, he and his

---

team stopped some suspicious vehicles in Karabilah, Iraq to search for weapons. As they approached the vehicles, an insurgent leaped out and attacked Corporal Dunham. Dunham wrestled the insurgent to the ground and in the ensuing struggle saw the man release a grenade. Dunham immediately alerted his fellow Marines, and then without hesitation, he covered the grenade with his helmet and body, bearing the brunt of the explosion and shielding his Marines from the blast. Col. Dunham died from his injuries eight days later, but not without saving the lives of at least two fellow Marines.²

No greater love.

Most of us in this room will not be called on to fall on a grenade to show our great love for our friends. Does that mean that we will never know the secret of this no greater love ourselves, since we might not literally lay down our lives for our friends?

Today is Mother’s Day, and it’s a good opportunity to think about the self-sacrificing love women have for their children. Even for those who have wanted nothing more of life than to have kids and nurture them into adulthood, there are sacrifices. For those who carry their children in pregnancy, they make room in their bodies for the growing life inside that will change their shape. For all mothers, children reshape their future, too. This sometimes means putting their own career goals on hold—whether because they decide to stay home and give up their jobs, or because they reprioritize the way they work for the sake of their children’s wellbeing.

No greater love.

I would be remiss if I didn’t mention also those men who do the same for their children, despite this being Mother’s Day. I know some of you in this church who have made just those kinds of sacrifices, some who have given up career goals to stay at home as the primary caregiver, and others who have made family more important than business success or social status.

Also, no greater love.

The essence of this matter of

² https://www.cmohs.org/recipients/jason-l-dunham
laying down your life for your friends is simply this: *Will your faith lead you to sacrifice your own interest for the sake of others or protect yourself at the expense of others?*

Christians today are too often fighting for their own rights against the rights of others. We are seen in the hallways of Congress, in the chambers of state legislatures and in meetings of local school boards arguing that the world should be organized to honor and defer to us. We love ourselves a lot.

On the other hand, when we defend the right of a Muslim girl to wear a hijab to school or argue against teacher-led school prayers that would marginalize non-Christian children in a public-school classroom, we are in effect laying down our lives for our friends. Sometimes these actions cost us. Fellow Christians think we are failing the faith. But subjecting ourselves to ridicule or rejection by some for the sake of others is an act of self-sacrificing love that shows we are “Jesus people” after all.

In 1954, Blacks in Belzoni, Miss., outnumbered whites 2-to-1. But like all Southern Blacks, they weren’t allowed to attend white schools. They were forbidden to eat in white restaurants. They would be arrested if they sat in bus seats reserved for whites. And certainly, they did not vote.

The Rev. George Lee, a Black minister, also ran a local grocery store and printing press. Lee knew where the change would have to begin—at the ballot box. So, he helped to start a chapter of the NAACP. They printed leaflets and held meetings, urging Blacks to register to vote. Whites in town immediately organized a White Citizens Council to fight back. The names of Blacks registered to vote were put on a list and circulated to white businessmen who retaliated by firing them from their jobs, denying them credit and raising their rent.

White officials offered Lee himself protection, on the condition he end his voter registration efforts. Lee refused. He would not seek his own welfare apart from his friends. It would mean laying down his life.

On May 7, 1955— the Saturday before Mother’s Day—Lee was driving toward home when he was hit by gunfire from a passing car. With half his face blown apart, he pulled himself out of
the car and made his way to a cabstand. Two Black drivers took him to the hospital where he died. Local authorities ruled that Lee was fatally injured in a traffic accident and that the lead pellets found in his face and neck were probably from dental fillings that had come loose.³

No greater love.

They will know we are Christians by our love, the song says. This love is the law at the heart of our faith—a love that lays down its life for its friends. In small ways and large, we all have the opportunity in the days we are given to show the love of Christ by the way we live.

There is no greater love. Amen.