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A life laid down
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Study guide:

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A life laid down

By Robert C. Blezard

What is the nature of living, dynamic faith? Is it merely intellectual agreement with a prescribed set of belief statements? Scripture tells us that faith goes deeper when our belief in God's love becomes infused with who we are and is expressed in self-giving, sacrificial love. Could this be the witness that our 21st century church needs?

Exercise 1: Show and tell

Bring your favorite cross or depiction of a cross to your study group for "show and tell." Talk about such things as where it comes from, how long you've had it, why it means so much to you, etc. How does the cross relate to your life, your faith and your walk as a Christian?

Exercise 2: The cross

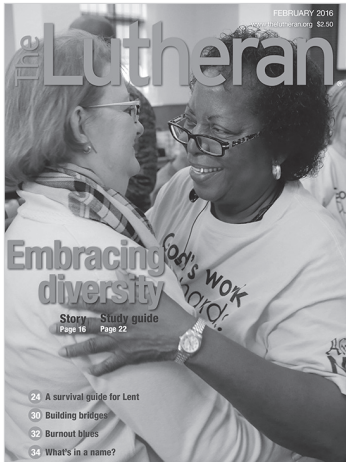
As a study group, assemble as many crosses or images of crosses that you can gather from your walls, jewelry boxes, desk drawers, etc., and lay them out on a table to view. Discuss:

- Which are more ornate and which are simple? What purpose does ornamentation serve? What messages do ornate crosses send? Simple crosses?
- Are any of them crucifixes, those with the figure of Jesus on them? What story do they tell, as compared to the "empty" crosses? Which are more appealing to you and why?
- Among the crucifixes, do any depict "Christus Rex"—Jesus dressed in a king's robe and a royal crown and seeming not to suffer? What message does Christus Rex reveal?
- What messages are conveyed by crucifixes that show the suffering Jesus?
- What does it say about Christianity that our primary symbol is an instrument of torture, suffering and death? What does it say about our God? Our own lives? Our theology?
- What does the cross say to the world? What does it say to you?

Exercise 3: Take up your cross

Read Luke 9:23 and discuss:

- The passage begins with a conditional statement: "If any want to be my followers" In using an "if-then" construction, what is Jesus saying? What is



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the implication about those who want to be Jesus' followers?

- Why would Jesus insist that his followers deny themselves? What's that got to do with faith and living? What does self-denial look like in our culture of extreme self-indulgence? What does it mean to you? What does it mean for your faith walk?
- Given the sole purpose for a cross, what does it mean to take up your cross? Why would Jesus want his followers to do that? Why must we do this cross-picking-up daily? What's the connection between picking up your cross and your faith and daily living?
- Does Jesus mean for us to literally take up a cross daily? What are some specific ways you and your congregation figuratively "take up your cross" to follow Jesus? Make a list.
- This passage starts with an "if-then" statement. How many who want to be Jesus' followers actually became followers? Do you want to follow Jesus?

Exercise 4: The two 3:16s

Look at John 3:16 and 1 John 3:16 side-by-side and discuss.

- How do the two passages interrelate? What are the points of intersection? How does the one help explain or clarify the other?
- Does "love" mean the same thing in both? What do you see as the similarities and differences?
- What is the role of sacrifice in love for others?
- How might these passages help unpack or explain Luke 9:23 (in the exercise above)? Looking at all three passages, how are we to live and relate to one another? How does that kind of life—its values, underlying assumptions, purposes, etc.—compare to that of the prevailing culture?
- Do you agree with Frank Honeycutt that the two 3:16 passages capture the essence of the Christian life and message? Why or why not?
- What do the passages mean to you?

Exercise 5: Love

February is the month of love, as evidenced by store shelves overflowing with candy in heart-shaped boxes, flowers, and other Valentine's Day cards and gifts. But that's much different from the love that is at the core of our Christian life. Look at these Scriptures: John 3:16, 1 John 3:16, Matthew 22:37-40, Luke 6:27-35, 1 Corinthians 13, John 13:34-35. Discuss:

- How would you describe Christian love? What words would apply? Craft a working definition of Christian love as it is revealed in these Scriptures.



About the study guide author:



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- How is it different from Valentines' Day love?

Exercise 6: Sacrifice

Is sacrifice essential to Christian love? What is sacrifice as mentioned in John 3:16 and 1 John 3:16? Also check out these passages: John 15:12-13, Luke 3:10-11, James 2:15-16, Matthew 5:42. Discuss:

- What do these passages say about sacrifice and giving? How are the two related?
- Jesus literally laid down his life for us, but is that literally expected of us?
- What are ways that we can, should and do figuratively lay down our lives for others?

Exercise 7: Decline

- Acknowledging that the United Kingdom (like much of Europe) has become mostly de-churched, one voice in the article warns that the same fate will come to North America. Do you think so?
- The ELCA has shrunk by about 25 percent in the last 25 years. How has your congregation fared? What do you see as the reasons for it?
- In the face of declining attendance and finances for many congregations, what is the best way to witness to God's love?

A life laid down

By Frank G. Honeycutt

We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another.

—1 John 3:16

Francis Spufford, a teacher and writer, lives in the United Kingdom. He's among the 6 percent of citizens there who still worship regularly on Sundays. The Church of England may trot out clergy and bishops for royal coronations, but the overwhelming majority across the pond largely ignores the church.

In Spufford's book *Unapologetic* (HarperOne 2014), he mentions his daughter: "Sometime over the next year or so, she will discover that her parents are *weird*. We're weird because we go to church."

How weird are they? To contrast, in the United States the equivalent figure of regular Sunday churchgoers is 26 percent of the population.

But here's what I find doubly interesting from Spufford's book: "Some surveys, tellingly, reveal that a further 16 percent of Americans *claim to be* regular churchgoers. From the British perspective this second statistic is even more startling and alien than the first one. The idea of people pretending to be regular churchgoers because it will make them look virtuous—or respectable, or serious, or community-minded—is completely bizarre to us. Here in Britain, it is more likely that people would deny they went to church even if they actually did, on the grounds of embarrassment."

We are living in challenging times for the church.

I once had lunch with an employee of the American Bible Society. He told me of the society's ministry and its translation work in many countries. Our conversation turned toward Europe and England, in particular. He had just toured many of the beautiful Gothic

churches dotting the countryside, which were largely empty on Sundays. He said, "You know, Frank, this reality in Europe is coming your way in America. Not as quickly, but it's coming."

What are we to do about such realities? If the current trends continue, what will our congregations look like in 25, 50 or 100 years?

Look closely at 1 John 3:16 sometime. Two 3:16s probably come to mind. We tend to recall the more famous one from John's Gospel: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son."

But 1 John 3:16 suggests that if this amazing gift really soaks in, our lives in return will resemble his: "We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another."

This echoes a phrase that says a Christian is a person who should be prepared to look good on wood—someone who's willing to love in the shape of a cross.



KATHRYN BREWER

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A sacrificial life

Recently I was home for lunch during three waves of rain and hail. I stood at the kitchen window and watched a hummingbird nonchalantly sip nectar as ice chunks fell from the sky. Somehow he dodged all of them. I expected the little guy to hightail it for cover, but no—it was a serene scene of nourishment in a context that could clock the bird’s brains out at any second.

I was envious of such peace and security, and I concluded that the hummingbird’s behavior involved more than simple survival. It had everything to do with sacrifice—for family, even for a species. It was some built-in inclination to love.

We live in a land that has kidnapped what love might look like: love is a many-splendored thing;

Maybe others will be drawn to Jesus when they actually see a different sort of love in his people—love that resembles a cross.

love is never having to say you’re sorry. Ask most people to draw a picture of love and many will produce a Valentine heart with an arrow through the center. But for Christians, love is concentrated in the gift of the cross.

We are dunked into the sacrificial life of Christ at baptism and are marked with the cross of Christ forever. Martin Luther signed his body with the cross before his feet hit the floor in the morning and again at night before dropping off to sleep, bracketing the day. This was a reminder of his core identity in baptism—a reminder that the shape of our lives is meant to look like a cross, love poured out for others.

“A life laid down” was a core message in the early Christian church. John’s community was definitely in the minority—a small band of people trying to remain faithful to Jesus. Perhaps the dwindling percentages of Christians in Europe and North America can learn something here. Maybe others will be drawn to Jesus, not through threatening pamphlets or door-to-door



sound bites but instead when they actually see a different sort of love in his people—love that resembles a cross.

Rodney Clapp is a writer and Episcopalian living in the Chicago area. He tells a story of his home church and a renovation project that required new sanctuary carpet.

The new carpet in Clapp’s church was beautiful, but there was a problem: it held a rather wicked static electricity charge that packed quite a jolt. This was especially true when coming forward for communion to sip from the metal chalice. Shoes built up a charge on the carpet and taking a sip of wine was enough to knock you on your duff.

Maybe the metaphor here works for any celebration of communion in our congregations—we come forward for peace and tranquility, green pastures and the status quo, but Christ chooses instead to knock our socks off with the radical forgiveness offered in his body and blood.

He laid his life down for us. In the strength of this meal, we go and do likewise. □



Author bio:

Honeycutt is pastor of St. John Lutheran Church, Walhalla, S.C. His latest book is *Jesus and the Family* (Cascade, 2013).