In October 2017, with the deadly flames of the Tubbs fire in northern California bearing down on his property, Roland Tembo Hendel knew it was time to round up his family, dogs and cats, and flee. But their Great Pyrenees dog Odin would not leave the goats he was in charge of, and despite the family’s efforts to carry him away, he stayed with the goat herd. So the family reluctantly watched Odin as they were departing, hoping they would see him again—but knowing it was not likely he would survive. The escape proved harrowing as the fire erupted but Hendel’s family finally reached safety. Hendel wrote on Facebook,“Later that morning when we had outrun the fires, I cried, sure that I had sentenced Odie to death, along with our precious family of bottle-raised goats.” Later the family returned, expecting the worst, but ... “We were able to make it back to the smoldering wasteland of our forest,” Hendel added to his Facebook post. “Every structure is in ruins. Trees are still burning.” But suddenly the goats appeared and raced toward the family. And there was Odin himself—fur burned, whiskers melted, limping on his right leg: still doing guard duty, despite the battle injuries he had suffered in his desperate fight with the flames. During the firestorm, Odin not only protected his flock, he also seemed to have adopted several baby deer who were huddled around him for safety. The dog, Odin’s, persistence, courage, and love for the goats, is an image of the good-shepherding of Jesus toward us.[[1]](#endnote-1) Odin would not leave the goats in the face of danger, but rather was willing to lay down his life, if necessary, in saving them. Jesus, the Good Shepherd laid down His life for us. And, as followers of Jesus, we are also called to love others so much that we are willing to lay down our lives for them.

Most of us will never be called to actually give up our lives to help another. Yet cultivating a willingness to give up our lives for others is important, even if something as drastic as loss of life is never required. Claudia Highabaugh, dean of religious and spiritual life, at Connecticut College, says that the fear of losing our life can diminish the power of love in deed for those in need.[[2]](#endnote-2) She goes on to say that love in deed need not be death, but rather, it is the active and willing response to meet the needs at hand with the resources on hand.

Any time we put the needs of others ahead of our own needs, we give up claim to our lives and demonstrate the self-sacrificing love that Jesus taught us. When we take some of our personal time to care for others, we demonstrate the self-sacrificing love Jesus taught us. When we give up some of our hard-earned money to help others, we demonstrate self-sacrificing love. When we give up our negative thoughts or judgments about a person who is different from us, we demonstrate self-sacrificing love. When we let go of a hurt that we’ve carried around for a long time and forgive another person, we demonstrate self-sacrificing love. When we challenge systems that cause others to remain poor or disenfranchised, even if that challenge is unpopular with our friends or bosses, we demonstrate self-sacrificing love. When our love sees beyond what it is we don’t like in a person and minimize that in order to see the person Jesus sees, we demonstrate self-sacrificing love. In fact, we demonstrate the self-sacrificing love of Jesus, the good shepherd, every time we let go of fears of what might happen to us to be open to loving and helping others – no matter what the cost.

Anglican priest and seminary professor Charles Kingsley wrote: “What was Christ’s life? Not one of deep speculations, quiet thoughts, and bright visions, but a life of fighting against evil; earnest, awful prayers and struggles within, continued labor of body and mind without; insult, and danger, and confusion, and violent exertion, and bitter sorrow. This was Christ’s life. This was St. Peter’s, and St. James’s, and St. John’s life afterwards.” [[3]](#endnote-3)

Jesus’s whole life was built upon giving up a claim to his own life so that others might live. Jesus’s whole life was built around great love for others. As followers in that long line of disciples going back to and including the apostles, we are called to live as Jesus did – to give up a claim to our own life so that others might live – to build our whole lives around love for others.

Amen

1. Synthesis A Weekly Resource for Preaching and Worship in the Episcopal Tradition, PNMSI Publishing Co., Inc**.** April 2018, Easter B, Week 4. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Claudia Highabaugh in *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Lent through Eastertide*; David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, editors, Westminster-Knox Press, 2011 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Synthesis, quoting Charles Kingsley in Daily Thoughts (N. Y.: Macmillan, 1884), p. 45 [↑](#endnote-ref-3)