

See if you recognize these words, written by Bill Withers and recorded in his soulful voice in 1972:

“Sometimes in our lives we all have pain, we all have sorrow;
but, if we are wise, we know that there’s always tomorrow.

“Please, swallow your pride, if I have things you need to borrow.
For no one can fill those of your needs that you won’t let show.

“If there is a load you have to bear, that you can’t carry, I’m right up the road.
I’ll share your load, if you just call me.”

Do you recognize it? It’s “Lean on Me,” and if you haven’t heard the original version recorded by the songwriter, chances are you’ve heard it by some other artist. It’s been recorded dozens of times, probably because it expresses what we want to experience in our own lives. We want to know there’s someone on whom we can lean when our lives seem too heavy to bear alone: “Lean on me when you’re not strong, and I’ll be your friend, I’ll help you carry on.”

The image that comes to us as we hear those words today is our Lord Jesus Christ, of course. Every year on the fourth Sunday of Easter, we remember our Lord Christ as the Good Shepherd of our lives. And every year, in preparation for this Sunday, preachers everywhere are wondering how to make the image of the Good Shepherd relevant in the lives of twenty-first century Christians who don’t possess the context to truly know the characteristics of either sheep or shepherd, or to understand the relationship between them. In John’s Gospel today we hear Jesus say that he is the good shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep. The relevance of those words to the crucifixion of our Lord is unmistakable because it’s been only four weeks since we worked our way through our Lord’s Passion and Crucifixion through the words of scripture.

In this season of Easter, though, we’re moving forward. Now we’re remembering his Resurrection, his promise of life everlasting to those who believe in him. And we’re also remembering the implications of all of these events on our own lives as we await life in the world to come: that the comfort we receive from our relationship with Christ is to be shared by us with others. That’s what we hear in these words of today’s passage from the First Letter of John as written in *The Message* translation, “This is how we’ve come to understand and experience love: Christ sacrificed his life for us. This is why we ought to live sacrificially for our fellow believers, and not just be out for ourselves. If you see some brother or sister in need and have the means to do something about it but turn a cold shoulder and do nothing, what happens to God’s love? It disappears. And you made it disappear.”

Those are strong words, words that might just put us on the defensive instead of inspiring us to follow them. After all, most of us are already involved in doing things for others: mentoring children, feeding the hungry, working with prisoners, volunteering in all sorts of capacities. Sometimes when I remind you of how Christ has called us to live and serve him in the world around us, I feel like I’m asking you to do what you’re already doing. Yet I suspect we don’t fully understand what it means to lay down one’s life, that is, to live sacrificially for others. Unless it’s within the context of a soldier who has died fighting for our country, we seldom hear of anyone laying down their life for another. And thinking about living sacrificially, about giving up what is important to us, seems to ask too much of lives that are, for many of us, already maxed out in demands, responsibilities, commitments, and needs—so much so that the thought of giving up even one more part of our lives can be overwhelming. Yet that’s what our Lord is calling us to do.

In 1989, seventeen years after Bill Withers released “Lean on Me,” a movie starring Morgan Freeman came out bearing the same name. Its setting was Eastside High School in Paterson, New Jersey, a school that had as many problems as it had students: drugs and gang violence were prevalent, but of additional concern to the town officials were the low scores on the state’s basic skills test, scores that put the school in jeopardy. The state legislature had passed a law requiring that any school that couldn’t meet those testing standards would be put into receivership. Joe Louis Clark, or “Crazy Joe” as he was nicknamed, was hired to be the new principal and given the task of fixing the school.

The first thing he did was expel three hundred students who were identified as drug dealers, users, and troublemakers. He rashly fired teachers who disagreed with him, especially if they did so in front of the students. Knowing that he was breaking the fire code, Clark put chains and locks on the doors after one of the expelled students managed to get inside the school and attacked another student. All of the students and their best interests were Clark’s focus, not only in his actions, but also in his interactions with them; he took time to get to know them, to learn what was going on in their lives and to show them that he actually cared about them.

The powers and principalities of the town and the school district didn’t take well to Mr. Clark, and soon they found a way to fire him, through the safety violation caused by the chains he had placed on the doors, an act that also landed him in jail. But word spread quickly among the students about what had happened, and the entire student body of Eastside High converged on the office of the Board of Education, demanding that he be released from jail, saying that Clark cared for them and they would not accept anyone else as their principal. I’ll leave the rest of Clark’s story up to you to discover, and I hope you will. It’s inspiring, and surely a modern-day example of a shepherd who lived sacrificially for his sheep and for what he believed in—in truth and in action, just as Jesus did.

The invitation in those words “lean on me” are full of love and compassion and the promise of comfort. The students at Eastside High learned to lean on Joe Louis Clark because they found him to be caring and compassionate. I’ve learned to lean on Jesus, just as you have, because I know that in the arms of his love I’ll find the comfort of his compassion, along with the strength and courage I need to get through whatever is troubling me. I’m called by my vocation to be compassionate to others. You also are called to be compassionate to others by your faith in our Lord Christ, and in the promises made at your baptism. Our compassion means living in the truth and action of our beliefs. But sometime that’s hard to do: when we’re tired, or we’re too busy, or we’ve heard that version of bad news one time to many times to sacrifice ourselves for another because of it.

Of course, in addition to our resistance to sacrifice, there are other obstacles that prevent us from living as our Lord Christ lived, in the truth and action of our beliefs. A significant obstacle is the doubt of our own power and authority. In today’s lesson from the Acts of the Apostles, we hear the governing authorities question Peter, asking “by what power or by what name did you do this?” Peter quickly answers that his power and authority comes from Jesus. Peter learned how to be a shepherd from the Great Shepherd himself. Remember when Jesus asked three times if Peter loved him? Each time Peter responded yes, and each time Jesus instructed Peter to take care of those he loved. “Feed my lambs.” “Tend my sheep.” “Feed my sheep.” No less is expected of us.

Our Lord was compassionate, moved with pity when he saw folks who seemed like “sheep without a shepherd.” And so also are we to be moved, right into the action we know our Lord expects us to take, despite whatever else is going on in our lives, despite our doubts about our own capacity to care for others in the way we are cared for by the Great Shepherd of the sheep. Just as Peter learned how to shepherd, so do we. And it’s not nearly so difficult if we remember that Christ loves us and calls us to love our neighbors. “My dear children, let’s not just talk about love,” First John reminds us in the words of *The Message*. “Let’s practice real love. This is the only way we’ll know we’re living truly, living in God’s reality.” Real love. Truth. Action. In the name of Christ. *Amen*.