

*Band of Brothers* has been one of the most popular mini-series on TV. It is the story of Easy Company of the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division during World War II. From their initial pre-D-Day jump into Normandy, through the Market Garden fighting to the Battle of the Bulge at Bastogne and finally to Hitler's Eagle Nest, this group of men forged bonds that exemplify the legendary ties of soldiers in battle where life and death bring out the best and the worst of human character.

The story is compelling because the story is real – Dick Winters, the first Lieutenant who eventually becomes a major is the key figure in the story and lives in nearby Hershey. It also reminds us that while most of history only remembers a few key figures by name, history is made by hundreds and thousands of ordinary, flawed people like the men of Easy Company. There was Lewis Nixon, who battled alcoholism; Ron Speirs who rumor had it massacred some German POW's in his rage after losing some buddies in a battle; There was 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieu. Lipton who was the morale booster and Doc Roe, the medic; Private Blithe who struggled with crippling anxiety and 1<sup>st</sup>. Lieu. Dykes who was removed from command.

Maybe some of you have known those kinds of relationships – the bonds forged in a cauldron of common experience and sacrifice that hold over a lifetime. These bonds are willing to accept the flaws and idiosyncrasies of those in that sacred company because they accept ours and together we are doing the best we can to accomplish tasks that others might think are inglorious or impossible.

Such is the bond described in John's Gospel this morning -- A band of brothers who had known the height of ecstatic experience and the depth of horrendous loss. They had

traveled together over the course of three years that were equal to a lifetime of astonishing achievements and events. Healings that could not be believed if you had not been there to see them; a multiplication of loaves and fishes near the very shore of Tiberias where they were now standing; a mountaintop experience of divine proportions beyond description; but also the growing hatred of enemies; a night of betrayal and beatings; the horrible death of their beloved Lord. On the hard anvil of life the twin-edged sword of their discipleship had been formed and sharpened.

But now the company was breaking up. They had had one final, unforgettable reunion with their Risen Lord on the beach, and his words still echoed in their ears – do you love me? Feed my lambs. Do you love me? Tend my sheep. Do you love me? Now they would go their separate ways and their discipleship would take as many different forms as their individual personalities, but each would be trying to show their love for a Lord who had given his life for them. Peter would continue to be the leader of a growing group of disciples far beyond this initial band of twelve, and he would show his love by dying a martyr's death. John would record these events in a Gospel and live a long, faithful life witnessing his love of Jesus.

All of them would continue to fish for people and tend the sheep given them by their Lord. Along the way, as one and then another completed their discipleship, replacements joined their company in an effort that continues even today. We are their successors, and Jesus words still echo in our ears – Do you love me?

One the one hand, it is very easy in the contemporary North American church to soften Jesus' call to lay down one's life in love, to see it as a figure of speech or an ideal far

removed from the day-to-day realities of struggles of the life of faith. But the history of the church is full of people who knew that Jesus' words were real, who answered the call to love Jesus and one another fully with their lives. Nor is such love a relic of the church's past. Love that knows no limits, including the limit of one's own life, also shapes the discipleship of the contemporary church. Martin Luther King, Jr., and Bishop Oscar Romero are the most obvious and well-known examples of love that knew no limits, but when one pays careful attention, one regularly notices stories of Christians disciples who gave their lives in love: nuns and priests who have stayed at their ministries in Central America, Africa and war-torn Eastern Europe, knowing that it will cost their lives; doctors and nurses in hospitals and health-care facilities in impoverished and embattled countries around the world who will not leave those for whom they care; martyrs of religious persecution across the globe. It is crucial that contemporary Christians remember this form of discipleship.

On the other hand, it is easy to minimize all forms of discipleship that do not involve laying down one's life. One is tempted to think, that there is no significance in my struggle to live the love of Jesus in my small ways when compared to those who lay their lives on the line daily? What is the worth of my witness when weighed against the witness of someone's death? The words about the beloved disciple in vv. 20-24 insist that his love for Jesus not to be devalued because his witness took the form of reporting traditions about Jesus and not martyrdom.

Perhaps the story of John 21:1-14 provides the key to working through this dilemma. The stories of John 21 begin, not with Peter's call to martyrdom or the praise of the beloved

disciple's witness, but with a story of Jesus' gracious gifts. Jesus gave gifts to all of the disciples in the boat: Peter, the martyr; the beloved disciple, the witness; Thomas and Nathanael, who wanted to see to believe (1:47-50; 20:24-29); to the sons of Zebedee and the unnamed disciples, about whom the Gospel records nothing except that they are disciples. For all of these people, whose discipleship would take varied forms, Jesus provided a miraculous catch of fish and hosted breakfast on the beach. Those who will give up their lives in love, those who struggle daily in what may seem the smallest places to bear witness to Jesus' love -- all receive Jesus' gifts. The discipleship of the believing community, John 21 suggests, begins with the affirmation and celebration of the gifts of God in Jesus.

Let me show you what that means – (people stand for various ministries – get list)

Education – SCS; VBS; Confirm; Library; Adult Ed; Small Groups;

Evangelism – cookie patrol; website; newsletter and mailing helpers; visitors; evangelists; pew pads; worship attendance;

Eco ministry – recycling,

Com. Action – food baskets; Christmas St. Nick gifts; Habitat; mission trips; Lutheran Charities;

Finance – audit; counters; financial secretary; treasurer; budget preparation;

Global

Hospitality – coffee hour donors; receptions; soup suppers; punch on lawn; picnics

Property – work days; mulch; clean up; facility repair jobs;

Stewardship – pony express; workshops;

Worship – Acolytes; choirs; musicians; Eucharistic ministers and Caresharers; friendly visitors; prayer shawl; liturgists; lectors; crucifers; flower delivery; altar guild; ushers; technical assistants; Rejoicing Spirits workers

Youth Min – advisers; auction helpers; youth forum; retreat chaperon and drivers; flea market helpers; mission trip participants; Youth group members

OWLS;; Men’s Breakfast; Needleworkers;

The witness of the disciples continues with us. We are the embodiment of that graciousness in the life of faith which provides the measure of faithful discipleship in the world today. Our ministry fair is a celebration of the multitude of our gifts that Christ has given us and which are used to bring his creative and redeeming Word to all the world.

As you visit the fair and celebrate the gifts Christ has given to you, you have the opportunity to choose how you will help further our Lord’s Work. Do you Love me?

Yes Lord, you know that I love you – Feed my sheep.

Amen.