

Labors of love (1 John 5:1-6; John 15:9-17)

Love is the lightest of responsibilities. The difficulty is when we take up the labor before the love.

by [Lawrence Wood](#) in the [May 17, 2003](#) issue

These are some of the nicest, happiest verses in scripture, easy to read because we all agree that we should love one another. Sunday school teachers affirm the thought; countless potholders and pillows are embroidered with it. Jeffrey Moses, in a book called *Oneness*, offers Jewish, Christian and Buddhist texts in the hope of showing that the three religions share the message: Love one another.

And then there's Robbie. Robbie wore out her welcome at the social service agencies a long time ago. Her poverty is real—I've seen the place where she lives. But she lives a hard life and runs through help like water. After a while you want to tell her enough's enough.

Recently she called the church repeatedly to ask for groceries. When I picked up the last call, I invited her to come to the food pantry on Monday. She said she didn't have a car. Couldn't someone drive some food out her way? "I haven't had nothing to eat in four days," she moaned. Folks who come to the pantry take whatever we have, but Robbie wanted smoked turkey, lean roast beef and a pound of coffee (decaf).

A bad storm had dumped a foot of snow on the community. Unwilling to saddle someone else with this request, I trudged down to the food pantry, filled a few grocery sacks and drove 20 miles out to her place, now and then muttering under my breath. The apartment was as awful as you can imagine: a single-story cinderblock building with a rotted roof. No one had bothered to plow the lot.

Robbie could see me coming. She stepped out of her door, smoking a cigarette. "Did you bring me the coffee?" she asked. "Decaf?"

I stopped about 20 yards out from her door. The snow was thick.

“Pastor,” she said, “could you pull up a little closer?”

“Robbie, just stay there,” I said, and waded through the drifts with first one sack, then the other, feeling the burden in my lower back.

She beamed, but before a conversation could begin I said, “Well, I think that’s about it,” and left without asking anything about her or what more she might need. It was not one of my better days in ministry.

I did, however, feel lighter. In spite of myself, I felt glad to have been of some help. And about a hundred yards down the road, I had the odd feeling that when I am judged, it will be by what I do for Robbie.

Love one another. Today’s scriptures don’t just advise us; they command us, with the same force with which Moses brought the law down from Sinai. Jesus himself says, “I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.” He calls us to love whether or not we feel love. Sometimes the feeling comes first, and the work is easy. In any event, says the First Letter of John, “His commandments are not burdensome.”

We read these words, as we are meant to, in the context of Easter. God has given the ultimate love gift, one that recognizes and answers all the pain in the world, and it’s not a warm, fuzzy feeling. For God to bring good out of all things—even out of the cross —is an act of love.

Of all the Gospel writers, John gives us the most pointed post-Easter story, one in which Jesus repeatedly asks Peter, “Do you love me?” and commands him to “feed my sheep.” It’s a story that recognizes that even the miracle of Easter doesn’t always motivate us as it ought, at least not on schedule. One by one, we come around and “we love because he first loved us,” by which John means that we *act*. Surely God’s hope is that our feeling will join our actions so that ministry happens spontaneously, naturally and joyfully.

Today’s mail brought a package from a friend in Chicago. Sam is a large, shambling, shy man who can’t quite look you in the eye when he speaks, but who does the most extraordinarily kind things. He has always lived simply so he can devote most of his time to these quiet works. Whenever he baked communion bread for his church, he

would bring extra loaves to those of us at the seminary, and he'd add insights from his devotional readings of Henry David Thoreau, W. H. Auden and Wendell Berry.

When I was in seminary, I was often in real need. That bread made a one-course meal for me on many Saturdays and Sundays, when hardly anybody else knew that I was desperately hungry. I didn't have a car, and I burned a lot of calories walking. Sam did without a car, too, and the unassuming, almost angelic way he ordered his life taught me a lot about ministry.

Sam is in bad health these days and shuffles around on numbed feet. Traveling by elevated train has become difficult. But getting out to do things for others "is what really gives me pleasure these days," he says. Now he'd sent me a book and a long note. At the bottom of the note was this verse: "A new heart I will give you and a new spirit I will put within you."

That is what Easter is supposed to do.

Christ's commandments are not burdensome. "My yoke is easy, and my burden is light." Love is the lightest of responsibilities. What else do we mean by a labor of love? The difficulty is when we take up the labor before the love. When we get it right, the work of love is hardly work at all.