

In the Name of the Living God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Our lesson today from the gospel of John focuses on friends, and friendship...which, in theory, is a wonderful thing. Mark Twain said of friendship, "The holy passion of friendship is of so sweet, and steady, and loyal, and enduring a nature that it will last through a whole lifetime...if not asked to lend money."

If we have lived for any significant period of time, we also know that real good and true friendship is a very rare thing. One clergy periodical shared disturbing statistics about making friends: Sixty percent of men over the age of thirty cannot identify a single person they would call a **close** friend. Of the forty percent who listed friends, most were made during childhood or school years. Most women can identify five or six women whom they call close friends, but a closer look shows that a lot of these were functional relationships. Friendship is not easy to develop.

Followers of Jesus were called "friends" before they were called Christians. The New Testament says it was in Antioch that the disciples were first called 'Christians', long after the death of Jesus and the dispersion of his disciples in the early days of the church. But Jesus himself said to the disciples, "I have called you friends."

Think about that. Before anything else. "I have called you friends."

We can each probably relate to a difference...there are friends, and then there are friends.

Who is Jesus referring to?

Love is part of the equation. The Greek words *agapáo* and *agapé* are found nine times in the verses we read. "As the Father has LOVED me, so I have LOVED you; abide in my LOVE. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my LOVE, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his LOVE...This is my commandment, that you LOVE one another as I have LOVED you."

The love of which the Lord speaks is a characteristic, not of what sweethearts have, but of what genuinely good friends enjoy. This love, *agapé* love, is an act of the will. Friends care about each other's welfare. If you are my friend, I want the best for you and want no harm to come to you. In fact, deep friendships are often forged in the midst of common suffering. Soldiers returning from the battlefield will always speak angrily of the ugliness of war and yet, in the same breath, they will talk with warmth about the friends that they made.

According to Jesus, expectations are involved in friendship. He said, "You are my friends if you do what I command you...and I appointed you to go and bear fruit..." Being let down by a friend, or in turn letting down a friend often strains or even breaks the relationship. Friendships are sustained when friends keep up their end of the bargain. Work to maintain the relationship.

The depth of this kind of relationship often requires sacrifice of some sort, and, in some rare cases, even the supreme sacrifice. "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends." As today is Mother's Day, that kind of sacrifice...to lay one's life down for another...might be more easily understood in the relationship of mother/child. Maybe not for everyone, but most folks understand the depth of love that mother has for child, and vice versa, could extend to that extreme.

But, regardless of the definition of the person in relationship...whether friend, or mother in the case of today...Jesus, in this gospel message, tells us of the very essence, the very nature of God, which is the very center heart of this season of Easter.

During the Vietnam War, there was a young girl who had multiple injuries and was bleeding heavily and in need of an immediate blood transfusion. Blood typing showed that the Americans present did not have the right blood type, but several of the uninjured children in the village did. Using what language the Americans had and sign language, they tried to explain to the frightened children that unless they could replace some of the girl's blood, she was going to die. They asked if anyone would be willing to give blood to help. Wide-eyed silence met their request. After several moments of eye-searching, a little hand went slowly up, dropped down, then went up again.

"Oh, thank you!" exclaimed the nurse in French, "What is your name?" "Heng," came the reply. The IV was started and, after a moment he shuddered, covering his face with his free hand. "Is it hurting, Heng?" asked the doctor. Heng shook his head no, but he kept sobbing, his eyes tightly closed, his fist in his mouth to stifle his sobs. Just then a Vietnamese nurse arrived to help and, seeing the boy's distress, she spoke to him in Vietnamese. After a few moments, Heng stopped crying, opened his eyes, and relief spread over his face. The Vietnamese nurse explained to the Americans, "Heng thought he was dying. He misunderstood you. He thought you asked him to give all his blood to save the little girl." "But why should he be willing to do that?" asked the Navy nurse.

The Vietnamese nurse repeated the question to Heng, who answered simply, "Because she is my friend."

Have you ever had a friend like that? At least one that I know of...on a hill, outside the city wall, and overlooking the town dump. And he said, "You are my friends if you do what I command you." But, just to be clear, friendship with Jesus is not simply about following some rules. The command IS:

"that you love one another as I have loved you." If you want to be my friend, be a friend to my other friends.

That sounds so simple. But we know it is not and, for whatever it is worth, we have not come upon this relationship with Jesus by accident. As he reminded the twelve, "You did not choose me but I chose you."

If Jesus wanted to win in the religion game, he should have chosen the Pharisees. The pious people. Those who prayed at least three times a day. Who knew their Bibles, and worked hard at obeying ALL of God's laws, and fasted once or twice a week to show their religious devotion. But Jesus instead chose fishermen, known to be crude and foul-mouthed, impatient and hot-headed. He chose a tax collector, a real swindler. A zealot...a fanatical revolutionary, and one who wanted all the tax collectors dead. It must have made for some interesting dinner conversation. And it still does, because Jesus chose us....known sinners, known to be somewhat less than perfect, known to have all kinds of problems in our lives. God chooses the rejects....and so should we.

"I have called you friends," Jesus said. That means that we are already claimed by God into a unique, extraordinarily personal relationship that is altogether rare in our own experience. May God help us to change, and make us more like who Jesus is for us...in the depth of love, and compassion that are only remotely and minutely known to us within the Trinity of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen.