

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 periodical shared statistics that 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. Real, true, deep friendships are 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." Before anything else, he said, "I have called you friends."

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." He says essentially, 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."

Most of us struggle to live into the love of Christ, and it seems not to matter because the world does not really care whether we love anybody or not because that neglect is how the world does not know, and also rejected him. Love your neighbor, Jesus says. Well fine. As for the other commandments, well, if you murder your neighbor, you will end up in prison. If you **BEAR FALSE WITNESS** against your neighbor, you may get hauled before the grand jury for perjury. If you commit adultery with your neighbor or your neighbor's spouse, you might get taken for everything you have in divorce court.

But if you do not LOVE your neighbor, who cares? The government? The courts? The news media? No one is really going to find out because, in the world, it has always been the norm to NOT love your neighbor. They do not want to spread the good news of loving our neighbor. So, why is Jesus getting so upset about us not loving our neighbors if no one else has ever really seemed to care?

Because love is the one true unique power that God has given us in our struggles, here is where we say, "Now wait a minute! Sure it works for Jesus, but I mean after all, Jesus is Jesus! The Son of God and all! It is easy for Jesus to say all this." After all, if it was really just a matter of being self-disciplined enough to just follow the rules, perhaps it would all be different. Being more religious?

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, less than perfect, having all kinds of problems in our lives. God chooses the rejects....and so should we.

Love is the center of the equation. The Greek words for love 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."

It is really as basic as the life of Jesus on earth is our perfect example of unconditional love. A reflection of God's desire for us, manifested in the real movements and speech as examples of the difference of living portrayed by Jesus.

In the words of one preacher: "If God had a refrigerator, your picture would be on it. If God had a wallet, your photo would be in it. God sends us flowers every spring and a sunrise every morning. When you want to talk, God listens, and waits lovingly for you to start. God can live anywhere in the universe but has chosen your heart. Face it friend, God is crazy about you."

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. It takes work to maintain a real, deep 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, as our experiences in everyday life often show. But most folks understand that 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.

The Book of Acts seems to show that Christians make their greatest strides for the church when we overcome our willingness to condemn, and our desire to harm those who have harmed us. It is only then that we can welcome sinful outsiders as brothers and sisters in the love of Christ. And, as the hymn goes, they will know we are Christians, not by our condemnation, not by our might, not by our savvy, they will know we are Christians by our love.

"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.