

GOSPEL READING: John 15:19-17

pg 110 NT

⁹ [Jesus said,] As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. ¹⁰If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. ¹¹I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.

¹²"This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. ¹³No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. ¹⁴You are my friends if you do what I command you. ¹⁵I do not call you servants^[a] any longer, because the servant^[b] does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. ¹⁶You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. ¹⁷I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.

Holy Wisdom, Holy Word...**Thanks be to God**

EPISTLE READING: 1 John 5:1-6

pg 241 NT

Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ^[a] has been born of God, and everyone who loves the parent loves the child. ²By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and obey his commandments. ³For the love of God is this, that we obey his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome, ⁴for whatever is born of God conquers the world. And this is the victory that conquers the world, our faith. ⁵Who is it that conquers the world but the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God? ⁶This is the one who came by water and blood, Jesus Christ, not with the water only but with the water and the blood. And the Spirit is the one that testifies, for the Spirit is the truth.

This is the word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God**

“Love Begets Love Begets Love”

One of Mike’s and my previous pastors, Rev. Joanna Adams, tells the story of a long-standing feud between a pastor and the church’s music staff. (It was not a story of her experience because she, like me, has a wonderful relationship with her staff, something we both truly treasure). But nevertheless, Joanna explains that the relationship between this particular church’s pastor and musicians went from bad to worse when he preached a fiery sermon on commitment. He scolded the congregation for not being more committed to Christian service than they were. After the sermon, the organist led the choir in singing, “We Shall Not Be Moved.” The next Sunday, the preacher preached on giving, and how members of the congregation ought to be more committed to the practice of tithing. That week, the organist chose the hymn, “Jesus Paid It All.” The next Sunday, the preacher admonished the congregation not to engage in gossip. The hymn that week---“I Love to Tell the Story.” At the evening service, the minister had had it. He told the congregation how frustrated he was to the point that he was really considering leaving. The hymn the choir sang was “Why Not Tonight?” And when the preacher finally did resign the next Sunday, he told the congregation in his sermon that it had been Jesus who had led him there, and now Jesus was leading him away. Of course, the choir sang, “What a Friend We Have in Jesus.”¹

Today we continue in our study of John 15, and we will consider the topic of friends and friendship. In his Farewell address, Jesus told his disciples that he would no longer call them his servants, like he’d shown them that they should be for each other. Now, he would call them also his friends. The friendship Jesus described was a two-way relationship, a reciprocal one, as all true friendships are. Each person in the relationship was to share what they had: their plans, heartaches, joy, their love. There was to be a mutual acceptance and respect for one another. However, they were not equals. Jesus, for sure, was still the disciples’ Lord and Savior. He was not their pal, not they his peers. He was/is still the One unto whom “every knee will bow in

¹ Joanna Adams. Sermon: “Servants No Longer” http://morningsidepc.com/archive/s3.amazonaws.com/dfc_attachments/public/documents/1200856/5-17-09_Servants_No_Longer.pdf. (accessed 5-3-18).

heaven and on earth and under the earth” (Phil 2:10). In this friendship each person was to look out for the well-being of the other and there would be a willingness of each friend to defend the other with their life, if necessary.

Jesus showed the disciples that he was this kind of friend when he went to the cross for them...not just them, but the whole world. It was the ultimate expression of divine love. As David Lose says, *“The cross is the natural if painful extension of God’s willingness to enter into our confusion, chaos, violence and heartache. It is simply testimony as to just how much God loves us—that God will not shy away even from the worst of humanity’s instincts. The cross shows that there is nothing that God wouldn’t do to save us through love. And there is nothing God will permit to remain between us and God’s love. This divine love will conquer. It will prevail. It will win.”*² (pause) Jesus wanted this love to be known to his disciples and through them the whole world. His followers were to mirror it with each other, and then to create a community of friends, a church, which would sacrificially love neighbors as itself, outside of itself. Love begets love begets love.”³

Obviously, this kind of divine love for neighbor is not an emotional, cozy feeling...it is a conscious decision to share oneself, to put oneself on the line and risk everything for the other. Consequently, it *“makes sure that justice is done in the world, that we leave the safety of our communities and go out to transform it.”*⁴ This kind of love, this friendship is selfless, sacrificial, and costly.

You may all remember hearing about the “friendship” between Luz Long and Jesse Owens. During the qualifying rounds of the 1936 Olympics, Jesse was walking to the long-jump pit and he saw a tall, blue-eyed, blond German athlete making impressive practice jumps. Even though Owens was well-favored to win, he remembers being very nervous when he saw the talents of the man. He was also acutely aware of the Nazis’ desire to prove “Aryan superiority”. However, the man came over, introduced himself as Luz Long, and said, “You should be able to

² David Lose. *“Easter 6B: As the Father...John 15:9-17”* In: In the Meantime. Davidlose.net (accessed 5-5-18).

³ Joanna Adams.

⁴ Osvaldo Vena. *“Commentary on John 15:9-17.* http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3649 (accessed 5/3/18).

qualify with your eyes closed!” Owen’s anxiety lessened. For the next few moments, the black son of a sharecropper, and the white model of Nazi manhood simply chatted. Then Long made a suggestion...since the qualifying distance was only 23’5.5” and Owens held the record for a jump greater than 28’, why not make a mark several inches before the takeoff board and have Owens jump from there, just to play it safe that he wouldn’t scratch? Owens did so and qualified easily. Then in the finals, he set an Olympic record and earned the second of four golds. The first person to congratulate him was Luz Long—in full view of Adolf Hitler. Owens never again saw Long, who was killed in WWII. He later said, “Melt down all the medals and cups I have and they won’t be even a plating on the 24-carat friendship I’ve felt for Luz Long.”⁵

In addition to being selfless, sacrificial, costly, this kind of friendship is also not easy. It requires us, branches in Christ, to first do some self-cultivation through the Holy Spirit in order that we may bear good fruit. For instance, we need to really nurture forgiveness in ourselves. If not, sooner or later we will find reasons not to love most everybody. We also need to prune back our quick tongues and our judgmental attitudes, nourishing acceptance and respect. If we don’t, we may find OURSELVES becoming the judged and marginalized. We need to grow compassion and a concern for others in need. If we do not, we will become hard-hearted and bitter (*pause*) We need cultivate our ability to love others...even if they are not very lovable.⁶

It’s true, some people are not very lovable. They are hurtful, cantankerous, obnoxious, difficult. Some are downright bad actors. And it’s a good thing that we are not commanded to LIKE them. We are allowed to be as Jeremiah, who said, “*O that I had in the desert a traveler’s lodging place, that I might leave my people and go away from them!*” But we are not allowed to NOT LOVE them. Jesus COMMANDED us to love our neighbors, all of them. It is not optional. It is a sacrificial grace learned from and made possible by the indwelling of God, an intentional, vulnerable act of the will.

⁵ David Wallechinsky, *The Complete Book of the Olympics*. <https://sermons.com/home/illustrations/2018-05-06> (accessed 5/3/18).

⁶ Scott Hoezee. *Easter 6B John 15:9-17* In: T⁶ David Wallechinsky, *The Complete Book of the Olympics*. <https://sermons.com/home/illustrations/2018-05-06> (accessed 5/3/18).

⁶ Scott Hoezee. *Easter 6B John 15:9-17* In: The Lectionary Gospel. http://cep.calvinseminary.edu/sermon-starters/easter-6b-2/?type=tje_lectionary_gospel. (accessed 5/3/18).

I recently read some good advice for us as we endeavor to do the hard work of loving as Jesus loved.⁷ Beyond accepting the fact that we may not like everyone, we can take small steps. If we can't love completely and sacrificially at first, at least we can set aside an hour or two a week serving others at the nursing home, the hospital, the prison, the school, the church, the soup kitchen or shelter. Another thing we can do is practice a lot. Like anything else, the more we practice, the better we become. A good thing to PRACITCE is to regularly reach out to those who we'd like to avoid. (*I saw a post on Facebook this week that said, "If you hang around trash, don't be surprised if you begin to stink." I'm sure it was meant to be cynically clever, but oh, how opposite it is to what Jesus teaches*). Jesus was "a friend of tax collectors and sinners". He ate dinner with those the religious leaders labeled unclean. He befriended the foreigner, women and children. So should we. We need to practice this love until we no longer notice a difference between them and us.

*Mother Teresa was once introduced prior to a speech as "the greatest woman in the world." She, who is only 4'11" came to the podium and said, "If I were the greatest woman in the world, you would think that God would have made me a little taller." Then she went on to say, "I'll tell you who I am; I am not a great woman. I am but a tiny pencil in the hand of God, one through whom God writes love letters to the world."*⁸

Brothers and sisters, in his farewell address, Jesus called his very flawed and novice disciples, friends, ones who were in a relationship of divine love with him just as he was in relationship with God the Father. And as he called them to be friends of his, he called them to be friends with each other, **no matter the cost**. He calls us to too. pWhile it is not always easy, we need not be worried or timid in the work. For we are not alone. The Quakers call their congregations a "Society of Friends". How right they are. With Jesus abiding presence, we, a society of friends, can continue to support one another and can work together to then befriend

⁷ Joanna Adams.

⁸ Mother Teresa. <https://www.coraevans.com/blog/article/10-of-the-most-beautifil-mother-teresa-quotes-on-love> (accessed 5-3-18)..

neighbors. That's how it works. And those neighbors we befriend? What do you think happens to them? Ah....yes...Love begets love begets love. Amen.