

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ!

There is a verse in our gospel this morning that I discovered when I was a 17 year-old kid just out of high school, ready to start college. It's verse 13, and it goes like this: "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for ones' friends." I love this verse! Jesus, the Son of God, laid down his life for his friends. Of course when he said this, those disciples who were standing there did not really know what he meant. But he showed them what he meant. Jesus showed us what he meant, because he laid down his life for us as well, you and me. Now I take friendship seriously, and to think that Jesus laid down his life for me, well, it makes me wonder, how can I not do the same? How can I not lay down my life for Jesus, for my brothers and sisters, my friends? I have said before concerning this verse that laying down one's life might not be in a literal sense, although it certainly can happen, but also in the sense that because of love, love that comes from God, love that is of God, bears fruit in that other people, their needs come first, before my wants and desires.

Well this bears a little discussion. So when folks who are not Christian think of Christians, do you think they think of love? Now many of us probably have a circle of friends who are not self-identified Christian, but I suspect most of us have a circle of friends that is predominantly Christian, if not Lutheran. I know that was the case for my wife and I nearly everywhere we lived, especially in California. Outside of work, nearly everyone we, associated with, even the parents of our son's closest friends, were Christian.

So you may or may not be surprised to find that most surveys show that people are attracted to the idea of loving one another, but the surveys also indicate that many folks think of Christians as negative, petty, swayed to much by political ideology, very dogmatic, downright disagreeable, not especially loving. Think of all the arguments in nearly every mainstream denomination over doctrine, from Roman Catholics, to Lutherans, even Baptists. You have heard variations of this before from your pastor, but one of the big reasons many people, spiritual or otherwise, do not attend church is because of the folks who are in those churches. Sounds like a challenge to you and me. Jesus said: "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to laydown one's life for one's friends." It is a pretty simple message to my way of thinking, the same now as it was 2,000 years ago. "I love you, so go now and love others."

You know it would be more than sufficient to be servants of God, and that is indeed what we are, but we are also his friends, chosen by him. We did not choose him, but he did choose us. Jesus loves us and reveals his ministry, ministry from God the Father, to us. Now think about this for a moment or two, we belong to this community of faith because someone in Jesus' name led us here. It might have been our parents, our spouse, our friends, even our children, we are here because we were led, welcomed and given a place here. Jesus acted through someone or something to claim us for his own.

Now we run the risk of becoming smug, but I do not know that we have to worry too much about it, Jesus chose us, and he chooses us to bear fruit, fruit that lasts, fruit that remains, even after you and I are long gone. We are loved by a love with staying power and we are called to bear fruit, acts of love, with staying power. We are called to care with the kind of care that costs us something, real conversations that lay foundations for new beginnings, confession and forgiveness that overcome sin, we are called to set aside personal preferences for the common good.

The idea that Jesus calls us friends warms the heart, but recall that I said I take friendship seriously. So did Jesus. Seriously enough to die for the sake of his friends. I suspect my friends, that Jesus has high expectations of you and me, his friends. I call tell you that as he has used others to bring you here, so too he intends to use us to extend his friendship to others.

I remember when I was in sixth grade, in a new class, knowing very few students, and I went out for what we used to call intermural sports. I was chosen by the coach to be captain of a softball team. I did not know anyone, I did not know who the best athletes were, I did not want to be there in the limelight so to speak. So I chose kids, and I chose quickly, doing what I had to do, then I did my level best to fade from sight. This choosing sides that takes place as kids was something I did not like, whether I was choosing, or whether I was one of those being chosen. But now Jesus tells us he chose us and we must respond faithfully to his choosing, not because we are the best, the first chosen, but because of what we have received.

As I mentioned, we are all here because someone, somewhere, at sometime, brought us, helped draw us to faith, faith that comes by grace. Someone might have done something you found intriguing, or perhaps brought you before you were old enough to decide for yourself. At any rate, Jesus commissions us, sends us to bear fruit, to make disciples, to do for others what family or friends, or even complete strangers have done for us, to invite, to act in love in Jesus' name.

Back in sixth grade softball, I was out of my league, but as it turned out, I had some natural ability, and I practiced. I developed the athletic gifts I had been given. Now all this has a bearing because no matter the nature of your gifts for sports, music, teaching, or anything else, God gives you gifts that can and are meant to be used for ministry. Gifts not to be hoarded or hidden, but used for bearing fruit. Sometimes we deny that we have any gifts, but we do have them. So what are your passions, what gifts for ministry do you have that you would gladly exercise for free? Have you identified what you do well, have you practiced using these gifts until they are second nature? Have you gotten to the point where you automatically invite friends, relatives and acquaintances, even strangers, to our service here? Many of you automatically do certain things here, maybe singing, or service, but are you limiting yourself? Are you a friend to those who have no friend? Are you bearing fruit, fruit that will last?

We do none of this to make the team, we are already on it. We do it because we abide in Jesus' love and he makes our joy complete. We do it because we express in Jesus' name who we are and what we believe. We do it for the sheer joy of it.
Alleluia! AMEN.