



A Homily by The Right Reverend Susan J.A. Bell

Sixth Sunday of Easter – May 9, 2021

Scripture Passages: 1 John 5:1-6, John 15: 9-17

+In the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Two readings about love this morning. Readings about the content and the character - and the power and force of love. Love that has been modeled for us by Jesus Christ and by the Father.

Jesus tells us also about the character of friendship in the same context. That is no coincidence.

What is friendship? Well, I think that for us, that subject is rather more complex than it used to be. The meaning of friendship is a constantly contested space these days.

It has taken on added dimensions, depth, and extra facets because of the impact of the internet and specifically social media. Some say it has been cheapened by social media, others – and I'd include myself in that – not – in fact, quite the opposite. We are living in the Facebook generation when friending or unfriending is serious business.

Of course my kids – all either teenagers or young adults now have completely moved on from Facebook which they rather derisively call “The Grandmother channel” now. The cheek!

But there's also something rather wonderful about that too because actually they do keep in touch with their Canadian grandmother through Facebook! It's a dimension of that relationship that I certainly didn't have with my own beloved grandmother. My mother undoubtedly knows her grandchildren better – shares a friendship with them - because they share more of themselves with her – and I think that's a gift.

So what does Jesus say friendship is all about? Because if we are the ones who want to follow him – become more like him – it’s important to know what Jesus says about these relationships in our lives.

Love each other. How to love each other? As I have loved you. How have I loved you? By making you a friend – and showing you the most important things about me – by being transparent, open-handed with myself. And literally by sharing the secret of the universe. That it is love that makes things go round. So now go and do likewise. In my name, with the strength of the Father and me in you – go and share yourself and make new friends and lay yourself down for them too.

Because, he says, no one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends (15:13).

Ah right. Well that’s a bit serious. And maybe a bit extreme as well? Or is it?

Well, as one theologian, Robin Maas says, “Few, if any of us, will be called to martyrdom; but [she says, mirroring the intent of Jesus’ words] all of us are called to a series of little deaths in the form of invitations to restrain or deny [our] self...[and make room for the other] The sending of God by God was the sending of Love – a crucified [and sacrificed] Love willing to lay down its life for friends and enemies alike. Your mission and mine – which we can only perform insofar as we are in communion with God and with one another – is to submit, out of love for one another, to countless, daily ‘little deaths’ until we have yielded every least and last remnant of self [and I’d add, self-centredness] to the purpose of Christ.” (Crucified Love, 98, 121).

I really love that. You see she reminds us that friendship isn’t aimless, it has purpose and it takes a particular shape.

Now, I have been gifted from God with good friends. The kind that don’t let you go. The kind that – as much as you choose them – have also chosen you. That is truly a gift in this life.

Well I have to tell you that that gift is in the pattern of God. It’s God’s Modus Operandi if you like. God chose us. Loved us. Not in spite of our faults. Because of them. Not grudgingly but creatively, with pride and belief in us.

God chose us. To love and to cherish and to know and to guide us and to make use of us – to give us purpose and direction.

God plans to use us – US! - As incredible as that sounds some days - to make this world God loves a better place.

Not that God's choosing us is a panacea, as if none of the difficulties of this life matter. The Pandemic still rages around our world this morning as we worship and there are still the scourges of poverty and violence in this world.

But - and this is important - but knowing that God has chosen us, loves us, and will use us gives us a well to draw from for the courage to face those challenges and that knowledge renews our strength day-by-day to do something about them.

Because ultimately, we can't fix this world by ourselves – by the power of our own elbow. That's God's work through us.

So knowing that God has promised to work that way can provide us with the strength and energy to work to make the corner of the world we live in – the garden of Niagara - a better place.

I suppose for me that means that I know in Christ – with Jesus' help - I must try not to live my life only to myself, but that I'm to be engaged in those small, daily deaths to my own self-centredness, and my own ego even when – maybe especially when – I don't feel like it.. And not for some extruded principle somewhere but because I love my friends – that's all of you by the way - as Jesus has loved me.

I love that definition of friendship. To lay one's life down for one's friends.

That's a Godly aspiration – which over time adds up to a life of purpose. It's a life that's lived for others, for something beyond our present concerns. That appeals to me. It appeals to me because it brings a kind of life that living to oneself alone just can't.

And it has a certain shape – the shape of a cross.

Cross-shaped love is not the denial of self to no further end. That would be pointless. After all, Jesus' story didn't stop with his death. There was so much more – his rising to life again, the work of the cross done and all our sins forgiven, the creation of the early church to continue God's mission of love - which was itself just so many friends laying down their lives for more friends and more friends until we arrive at the present moment. And this kind of friendship, rooted in God's love for the world, bears the fruit of justice, of joy and reconciliation. It creates space for life where it seems that there is none, making room for other people to flourish. It nurtures friendships and fosters the ability to trust in God's generosity and grace. It includes the excluded, restores the marginalized to the centre of community, meets the needs of the hungry, the isolated, and the oppressed.

It's special and a distinguishing feature of the kingdom, this kind of friendship – this cross-shaped love that we're called to.

So. I'm going to leave you with a question today: who are we called to make space for? Who are we called to lay our lives down for so that there may be joy, justice and reconciliation?

I can think of many friends we're called to love this way: the Indigenous Peoples of this land as well as People of Colour; in whom the spirit of God shines beautifully. Our friends who live in places where the COVID-19 vaccine is not shared equitably. Our friends whose lives are blighted by poverty, by trafficking, by substance abuse. What might we be being called to do for those friends in the spirit of Godly friendship?

I'm just going to leave that there for a little bit. Perhaps you might think and pray about it and we might pick that up soon?

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