

Easter 6

May 17, 2009

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of all our hearts be acceptable in thine eyes, O Lord our strength and redeemer. Amen

*No one has greater love than this to lay one's life for one's friends, You are my friends if you do what I command you.*

A friend once told me that “words” are a bit like little children.

They are always in motion and never sit still for very long.

Take for example the story that is told about Christopher Wren's reconstruction of St. Paul's Cathedral.

Wren worked on the project for over 30 years. Yet when he gave Queen Anne a personal tour she told him in typical British terseness that she found the new building to be “*awful, artificial, and amusing*”.

Most of us would have been crushed to have had our life's work so disparagingly criticized.

Wren's biographer, though, reports that upon hearing these words,

Wren gave an audible sigh of relief, sank to his knees and thanked her majesty for her graciousness.

You may ask how such a reaction could be possible. To our modern ears, the Queen's words seem so cruel and unfeeling.

But way back in 1710, the word awful meant “awe-inspiring”, artificial meant “artistic”, and the word amusing meant “amazing”.

The story reminds us that the meaning of words does indeed change over time.

And it can be difficult for us to capture the nuances of certain Biblical words like *friendship and love* that we hear in popular verses:

*No one has greater love than to lay down one's life for one's friends.* We all may have heard this verse...but what does it really mean....

Before we go any further you should know that the ancient Greeks had four different words to describe different types of human love.

There was eros, *erotic human love*, and *storge* which meant natural affection or the love parents may have for their children.

There was also Agape or (our English word charity), a type of love that did not depend on any conditions like parenthood.

And finally there was, *philia*, the love of friends which the Greeks considered to be the most important.

Jeremy Taylor captured this ancient sentiment when he wrote in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, "When friendships were the noblest things in the world, charity was little."

Taylor was not the first Christian theologian to note that an important shift had occurred in the transition from a pagan to a Christian culture.

Until the time of Jesus, *philia*, the love of friends was accorded a higher place in the hierarchy of the four human loves.

Poems and epic tales celebrated the love of friends. Plato and Aristotle discussed it in their philosophical writings

Yet when Jesus arrives on the scene, things start to change. Jesus uses the parable of the Good Samaritan to describe to his listeners, “who was their neighbor”.

In attempting to sum up the God’s law, Jesus tells his audience they are to love God (with all their heart, soul, and mind) and to love their neighbor as themselves.

The parable suggests that Christians are called to love all people without any type of preference.

This type of love (agape), is the same type that St. Paul describes in First Corinthians when he says “love is patient, love is kind, love does not insist on its own way.

In fact, if you have a copy of the King James Bible at home you may recall the famous section on love the in 13<sup>th</sup> chapter of I Corinthians was translated originally as “charity”. Charity is patient etc...etc...

Yet even Jesus seems to have difficult putting this teaching into practice in his own life.

He called twelve “special” men to work along side him as his companions and friends.

And in John’s gospel we also hear about a particular disciple whom Jesus loved. (Tradition has given this disciple the name of John.)

They must have really trusted him, because Jesus was willing to send his mother to live with this disciple as he was dying on the cross.

Of course, you may ask, why does all this matter? Why should any of us care whether we love others in the way Jesus commands?

I believe these questions lie at the heart of what it means to be part of a Christian community.

Jesus tells us in the gospel that we must be willing to lay down our lives for our friends.

Does this mean that when it comes to people I don't particularly like I am off the hook?

Is it even possible given this command of agape for Christians to have close friends?

After all, we are called in baptism to give Christ-like love to every "neighbor" we encounter.

Wouldn't it be unchristian to express a preference for certain folks as our friends? Clergy wrestle with this question all the time.

A spiritual mentor once even told me that as a priest, when I made a friend, I ran the risk of losing a parishioner.

This may sound harsh but my mentor was describing the tensions that can arise in human relationships when folks become close friends.

In fact, I believe it is impossible for us to live together and not have occasions when we do things that may hurt each other, or cause each other pain.

All of us share the same faults, imperfections, and sinful temptations.

And we should remember there are even many sins that are committed with the best of intentions.

Our confession of sin in the BCP captures this problem well when we ask forgiveness for things we have done and left undone....

And you and I are in constant need of God's grace, God's love and God's friendship in our lives.

Yet despite these numerous challenges, I am convinced that Christians cannot love each other in the abstract.

As a friend of mine wrote, God sets the solitary in families and God gives us particular friends to be loved and to cherish.

In fact, to foreswear, those intimate bonds of friendship for a universal benevolence for all people seems contrary to our human nature.

And it seems wrongheaded to profess love for all people and fail to somehow put that into action, no matter how imperfectly we all may do it.

In fact, if we are not careful Christian love can easily become a little like the way that Linus in the comic strip, Peanuts once told his sister Lucy that he loved humanity, it was just people he couldn't stand

Does this mean philia, the love of friends is superior to agape, the Christian love Christ commands?

No, the love we give in friendship and in our personal relationships with each other is the way that God prepares our hearts for that divine transformation.

Our friendships are you might say, schools of virtue where we are continually challenged to give Christ's love to others. Even to those folks that you (and I) might think are unlovable.

We learn about the great depths of God's forgiveness and love in those difficult times when we fail each other and are challenged like Christ to forgive, to seek reconciliation and to continue on this journey together.

This is what it means to lay down our lives for each other.

In closing let me once again use a 16<sup>th</sup> century world. Despite our  *manifold* sins, God is somehow able to use our human love to transform our imperfect lives for the work and ministry of our wonderful church.

As our Lord reminds us, You are my friends if you do what I command and most importantly give to others the love God has given to you. AMEN.