

Christ Episcopal Church
2 Emerson Street
East Norwalk, Connecticut 06855

6 Easter (B)

May 6, 2018

DRAFT

8 AM and 10 AM homilies

by the Rev. Joe Parrish

“Love is our standard”

The Holy Gospel according to

John 15:9-17

Jesus said to his disciples, “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. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete. This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant 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. You 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. I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.”

Dear Lord, what a privilege it is to be your friends. May we not presume upon your love for us, but may we be the fruitful friends which you wish us to be. Amen.

Early in my career I took the required Clinical Pastoral Education course at a local hospital in New York where almost all the

patients had some sort of neurological trauma caused by accidents or disease. The problem most had was that their brains could not communicate with much of the rest of their body, their spinal cord was not intact, and neurological impulses from their brain could not be received by their diaphragm or arms or legs, and so on. So far this problem still stumps medical science.

I use this illustration to contrast with how love works. Love opens pathways whereby we can communicate care and concern for others. Even breaking that connection does not mean that love is lost, but only perhaps temporarily 'disconnected'. Sometimes love,

especially a love which is called ‘filial’ or ‘parental’ can be reconnected, and many parents and grandparents and siblings are hopeful that will happen for their children or grandchildren or other siblings and relatives, and that can occur, defying what medical science says about brains and neurons. It is a ‘spiritual’ connection that does not follow the ‘laws’ of medicine or biology, and we call that sort of love ‘agape’ love, selfless love. Love is the key to an agape connection. Agape love overcomes what nothing else in all of creation can do. Agape love often does ‘conquer’ all. Love is probably the most powerful thing in the

universe, and beyond. Love is how Jesus communicated with his Heavenly Father, and with his disciples, and indeed even with us here today. Love does miraculous things.

Love creates friendship; Jesus today tells us that we are to ‘abide’ in his love, remain in love with him, and with each other. That turns out to be a tall requirement for human beings. We tend to offer love only when we think it will be reciprocated. A story is told of a beggar who received all the money a Christian had, but then turned and scoffed, saying, “You only did that because of Him, pointing his finger upwards. And maybe there was a smattering of truth in that.

Sometimes we only love others because we know Jesus commanded us to do so. The challenge is to incorporate love into our inmost being so much that we can love more naturally and more selflessly. Without love, we gain nothing, Paul writes in First Corinthians, Chapter 13:3, in a text which is probably the most popular reading for both marriages and funerals. We want love to last. We often need love to last, but of course we can be dependent on receiving love in order to give it, and that is probably not 'true' love. True agape love is selfless, kind, not seeking the fulfillment of our own needs, but being a fulfillment of others'

needs and feelings. But of course we can be ‘used’ since we may have an addiction to the need for love. That agape love is only healthy when we are secure within ourselves, and when we are secure in our love for God—and that is a tall order. So, Jesus made that his primary commandment, that we are to love God with all our heart, mind, and spirit, and we are to love our neighbor as ourselves.

Pastor Jeff Kellam pictures a busy mother busy at work trying to clean the house after getting home from her office job. Her four year old, having spent the day at

the child care center, tugs on her mother's leg and says, "I love you, Mommy." "Yes, dear. And I love you, too," the mother replies, without taking her eyes off the dusting. "Mommy!" "Yes, dear. What do you want?" "I love you!" "I know, Honey." Then, with a leap from a chair, the little girl jumps onto her mother. And hugging her with every muscle, the little girl says to her astonished mother, "I love you, and I just had to do something about it." Love has to do something always. [Jim Kellam, sermon of May 9, 1999]

Pastor Bob Barnes of New Zealand cites a study more than 50 years ago at the Johns

Hopkins University in Baltimore. A young sociology professor assigned his class to a city slum to interview 200 boys. This was their assignment: “On the basis of your findings, predict the future,” he said.

Shocked at what they found in the slums, the students estimated that 90 percent of the boys interviewed would someday serve time in prison. Twenty-five years passed. The same professor asked another class to try to locate the survivors of the 200 boys and compare what had happened. Of 180 of the original boys located, only 4 had ever been in jail. Why had the predictions not turned out as the former class expected? A

common denominator was sought in their lives, some value or influence that may have marked the difference. Through more interviews, it was found that over 100 of the men remembered having the same high school teacher, a Miss O'Rourke, who had been a tremendous influence on them at the time. After a long search, Sheila O'Rourke, now 90 years old, was found in a nursing home in Memphis. When asked for her explanation, she was puzzled. "All I can say," she concluded, "is that I loved every one of them." [Ecunet's "Sermonshop Sermons," Number 1814, May 2000]

The famous painting by Leonardo da Vinci of “The Last Supper” was painted on the wall of a monastery dining room in Milan, Italy. But over the years the monks grew immune to the picture's incredible significance and didn't see any special value in it. They thought access to the kitchen was more important than those few colors on the wall. So they cut a doorway right through the lower middle of the picture. The remnants of the doorway in the picture can still be viewed. [John R. Claypool, SermonMall, May 2000] The picture however, contains a personal message about Leonardo da Vinci, some say. He had

become quite angry with a certain man. Threats of vengeance had followed Leonardo's bitter words of resentment, so much so that that Leonardo could not regain his composure as he tried to complete his masterpiece. He had begun to paint the face of Jesus. But he was powerless to give it a divine expression. And in a moment of insight Leonardo da Vinci realized he must first seek out the man whom he had insulted and threatened, and ask his forgiveness. This he did, and then, and only then was he able to proceed with the masterpiece.

[Richard J. Oman, "Sermon Mall," May 2000]

It has been said that the only way to have a friend is to be a friend. How well do we make friendships?

Others have noted, 'It is simple to love one another, but it is not necessarily easy.'

["Synthesis" for May 28, 2000]

We are to abide in Jesus' love. It may not always or ever be easy, but that is our Lord's command to us and to all of his disciples.

When we do abide in his love our lives will be intertwined with his, and we too will become his fruitful friends. As we love one another we will find what true friendship is all about.

I have a few friends who would do almost anything for me. I have known them for most of my lifetime. We share with each other when we can be close in proximity. But we remember each other as though we were a part of each other's family. It is the closest thing I have of more brothers and sisters. Of course, some of them are biological brothers, I don't have female siblings, but we do enjoy each other's company and look after each other's best interests. But beyond family, we may have a few very special friends who think the world of us, and of whom we think the

world of. And aren't we glad to have those friends?!

King Duncan writes, "Love is not a feeling, it is a command,"..."a decision to give up our own self-interests." ["Dynamic Preaching," April - June 2000, Page 59]

The presence or lack of love seems to be formative in our earliest years. A judge in Philadelphia, speaking of his experiences dealing with juveniles in trouble with the law, said that most of the young people who came before his court for discipline were hostile and aggressive. But their attitude didn't bother him nearly so much as the

attitude of their parents. Often the child's father would be outraged: "Why do you do this to my boy?" he would ask. "Why bring him in here?" "But," said the judge, "never once did I see any of those fathers show any sign of affection for their teenagers." It makes one wonder if there is much less juvenile crime in homes where there is lots of affection expressed. ["Dynamic Preaching," Page 61]

In her undergraduate thesis at Harvard University, Karen Greve found that the less time parents spent with their children, the more they bought them gifts--discretionary items such as toys, videos, and books.

Parents, who were with their kids more, spent less. [Juliet B. Shor, “The Overspent American,” 1998, Page 89] For some parents, it is easier to give children things, rather than wings. Toy makers watch the divorce rate for the same reason. When the divorce rate rises, so do toy sales. Divorced parents and grandparents tend to compete for children's affections, so they buy toys. [L.M. Boyd, "Spokesman Review," March 15, 1993]

I spoke to a young mother, a first grade teacher, who told how she would spend time with her ten year old son. “We read together, or he watches television while I

read,” she said. “But we spend a lot of time together.” And her son said, “And we do watch the same television movies, too.”

How close are parents to their young children? It can make a profound difference.

I still vividly recall a church staff retreat I was on a few years ago. Our retreat leader later became the Bishop of Ohio. He pointed us to these very verses in John's gospel where Jesus says, “I do not call you servants any longer, ... but I have called you friends.” It seemed to dissipate a lot of the drudgery we were feeling in our staff capacities. Can we say that about our

children and nieces and nephews, that we are their friends? And for those of us who sometimes think we are slaving away for Christ's church, are we forgetting that we are only doing our task as his friends and not as his slaves? Have we been too distracted by our busy-ness to realize that what we are doing is bearing lasting fruit for God's very kingdom on earth?

Phil Gilman points out that when Jesus tells us to “abide” in his love, the “abiding” is an active state of doing God's love, not simply resting in, relaxing, and enjoying God's love. As 1 John 3:18 notes, “Children, let us love not in word or speech

but in deed and truth.” [Ecunet's
“Sermonshop Discussion,” May 2000]

Love is not just a ‘way’, love is the only
way to express Christ’s love to others.
When we love, we bring Christ into the
relationship. And miracles just seem to
happen.

Amen.

AddendA:

The very word “friend” is from the
Anglo-Saxon word, “freon,” which means

“to love.” A friend is one whom we love.
Love can exist only if it produces more love.
We must be fruitful if we truly love.

Friendship is an all too scarce commodity in our world. A recent U.S. poll on friendship examined the friendship patterns of men and women over age 30 and found the following conclusions. Sixty percent of American men over 30, more than half, cannot identify a single person whom they would call a close friend. And among the other 40 percent of men who were able to identify a close friend, almost all without exception had close friends from friendships

established during childhood, high school, or at the latest, during college years. Men did have so called “functional relationships,” relationships with little or no genuine emotional attachments--such as golf or fishing buddies, or even, unfortunately, drinking buddies. American women also were able to cite functional relationships only, usually with five or six other women who may be exercise class members, quilting circle or knitting friends, or lady friends in a women’s church group; however, they often shared nothing with those persons outside that specific activity context. As a result, the support group for

these lonesome, friendless people are barbers or beauticians, bartenders, and psychotherapists. Friends, true friends, are quite hard to come by. Jesus, recognizing the loneliness of humanity, commands them to take his antidote; Jesus commands them to love one another as he has loved them. Jesus' cure for loneliness is love, true, self-giving love.

What does it take to be a friend? A junior high English class was asked to write imaginative definitions of a friend. One student said, "A friend is a pair of open arms in a society of armless people." Another

said, “A friend is a warm bedroll on a cold and frosty night.” Others said, “A friend is a lively polka in the midst of a dreary musical concert.” “A friend is a mug of hot coffee on a damp, cloudy day.” “A friend is a beautiful orchard in the middle of the desert.” “A friend is a glass of milk and honey when you can't go to sleep.” “A friend is a good book on a rainy day.” “A friend is a hot bath after you have walked 20 miles on a dusty road.” [Thanks to John Killinger for these quotations in SermonMall, May 2000.]

Here is another story of love, this time instead of the love of an adult for a child, it is the other way around. It is a story of Babe Ruth, also shared by Norman Vincent Peale. This great baseball player was a big man, but graceful, even rhythmic in his motions. When he batted, it was said to be like a symphony of beauty—the crack of the bat, the run, the tag on the base. He hit 714 home runs and multitudes loved him. But then, like all men and women, he got older. He was traded to the Boston Braves by his beloved Yankees. He came to one of his last games when the Braves were playing the Reds in Cincinnati. A big crowd was

there to watch the great Ruth who, though he was declining, was still the “Babe”. But this day he wasn’t doing well. He fumbled the ball twice, made a couple of bad throws, let in five runs for the Cincinnati Reds. As the game ended, the old boy with his head down walked slowly toward the dugout.

The fans who once had cheered him so wildly were now booing. Then a small boy jumped over the railing onto the playing field. He threw his arms around the knees of his great hero. Ruth picked him up and then set him down, tousling his hair. Hand-in-hand, the two started walking off the field. The booing ceased and there was a

deep silence. Those fans witnessed the love of a great man for a little boy and the love of the boy for the great man.

-Rev. James D. Kegel, in SermonWriter

<https://www.sermonwriter.com/sermons/john-159-17-commandment-love-kegel/>

Aristotle said, “The opposite of a friend is a flatterer”

What is better than having a sincere friend?

Description:

Love is indeed a connection nurtured by God. When we love selflessly, Christ comes into the equation. Then miracles happen.

Tags:

Love, agape, filial, friend, parent, child, grandparent, grandchildren, sibling, relative, selfless, commandment, Jesus, Christ, God, heavenly, father, Babe, Ruth, Yankees, Red, Sox, Boston, New York, relationships, Ohio, Johns Hopkins, Harvard, Vinci, toys, forgive

St. John's Episcopal Church

Elizabeth, New Jersey

The Sixth Sunday of Easter (B)

May 4, 1997

A Sermon by the Rev. Joe Parrish

The Gospel: John 15:9-17

Jesus said to his disciples, "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. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy

may be complete. This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant 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. You 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. I am giving you these

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other 40 percent of men who were able to identify a close friend, almost all without exception had close friends from friendships established during childhood, high school, or at the latest, during college years. Men did have so called “functional relationships,” relationships with little or no genuine emotional attachments--such as golf or fishing buddies, or even, unfortunately, drinking buddies. American women also were able to cite functional relationships only, usually with five or six other women who may be exercise class members, quilting circle or knitting friends, or lady friends in a women’s church group;

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I recall one of my closest friends, my mother has a picture of him and me as infants sitting on a blanket, probably much

less than two years old, trying to pull each others' hair--I had some, he didn't. He remains to this day one of those to whom I relate to most easily, even though we see each other only about once a year. We still are a special emotional support for each other. We do not have to agree. We can share our deepest feelings on a variety of topics. We help each other when we can. He even indirectly helped our Diocese here in New Jersey move to a voluntary contribution program from the churches, which became a great benefit for St. John's as for many other struggling churches. And in turn our Diocese will be a leader in

bringing about a similar change for the national Episcopal Church as a whole. Our church member pledges are voluntary, so why shouldn't our church pledge to the Diocese be voluntary as well; and why shouldn't a voluntary pledge be the standard for the denomination as a whole? My friendship will have significant impact on a whole denomination. Our church more than tithes to the Diocese its income from you our members as an example of what we hope you will do as well. Tithing is the official minimum standard for the Episcopal Church. So we hope all here today will make good progress in the coming year to

become tithers. Friendships are powerful things to have.

But friendships need to be more than superficial--not what we can get from someone else, but what we can share with someone else. Our tendency is to turn inward, to be overly protective of ourself, to be more a recluse than one who is called out to be a friend of Jesus, and to befriend the other followers of our Lord.

What are practical ways of making friendships? One beginning is to slow down and actively look for ways to make new friends and to renew old friendships. A second idea is to look for the good in

people, get behind their liabilities and see their assets. A third general guideline is the Golden Rule, do unto others as you would like to be treated yourself, but be sure always to be loving to others. Friends will tend to want the same things and share common values, such as honesty, kindness, generosity, and openness. Friends will be able to speak their minds to each other, fully and without fear, sharing their true feelings, thoughts, desires and expectations. Friends will be able to hold each other accountable and not be codependent. And friends will be those who need each other; the loss of a true friend is deeply painful;

Jesus does not want to lose us, just as we do not want to lose each other.

The well known writer and psychologist Scott Peck calls this scene of our gospel lesson the Maundy Thursday Revolution. The preceding verses are those describing Jesus' actions just before he is arrested at Golgotha. What Jesus does on Maundy Thursday is truly revolutionary. He washes the feet of those who prior to this thought of themselves as the slaves or servants of Jesus. Yet incredibly here Jesus is on his knees washing the feet of his fellow followers, the position of servant and served is turned completely upside down. So Jesus

sets the scene for his declaration that those who obey his commandments are his friends, not his slaves.

For many years I saw my ministry as a lay person as somewhat of a servant, but during seminary I attended a retreat led by someone who became the Bishop of Ohio. His whole presentation was how Jesus calls us his friends, not his servants. I had never thought of that idea before, even though I had read John's gospel perhaps several times. Being a friend of Jesus is a wonderful relationship--can there be anything better? The Old Testament called only two people friends of God--Abraham

and Moses, none others. Yet now the New Covenant has come, now the Messiah has come, the whole fellowship of believers, all Christians have the status of Abraham and Moses. We are even called the adopted sons of the Father in heaven, even heirs with his only begotten Son. How fortunate we are! Jesus offers us love and his friendship!

Christianity spread predominantly by providing a better, happier, more secure way of life, becoming about ten percent of the world's population by the year 300 A.D. The revitalizing power of Christianity is Jesus' commandment to love one another. The church is a place where the atmosphere

is love. Friendships abound. Potential new friendships are everywhere. We only have to reach out to others as friends would reach out to each other. And we have Jesus as our common friend, who tells us that whether we go in the right direction or the wrong direction he will get us out of our jams. He will cover for us when we are not perfect. He will not leave us or desert us. Jesus promises to be always with us, through thick and thin, through peace and through war, in the good times and in the bad times. Jesus is our friend, and friends stick together! What a friend we have in Jesus!

We cannot be friends with one whom we are afraid of. Friendship and fear are incompatible. We thus live a life without fear of the loss of our salvation, without the anxiety that we can ever break the bond of friendship which was permanently forged at our baptism. We are permanent friends of the Lord.

But we are admonished to keep his commandments. What are his commandments? Jesus cites the ten commandments, but he also gives three additional commands of his own--one is to do unto others as we would have them do unto us, that is the Golden Rule mentioned

earlier. Then there is the command to love God with all of our mind, heart, and soul, and love our neighbor as ourself. And finally Jesus commands us to make disciples of all people. How do we measure up to these commandments of Jesus?

A poor uneducated priest was sent by his Bishop to a church in rural Mexico. However, the congregation did not like his uneducated manners so they tried every way to get him to leave. Finally, someone shot him and left him for dead. A good Samaritan found him and nursed him back to health. And the priest turned around and went right back to the church who had tried

to kill him. Eventually they learned to love him because he loved them. Love will break every barrier in time.

An elderly man took his beloved elderly dog to the veterinarian for treatment. The man asked the veterinarian if he loved animals, to which the vet replied that he loved God first, then animals. But the old man refused to let the vet treat his old pet. He said, “He is my friend, and I can trust my friend only to the care of a doctor whose first love is animals.”

We show others how much we love God by how much we love them.

Harry Golden, editor of the Carolina Israelite, asked his atheist father why he went to the synagogue each week. His father replied, “There are lots of reasons for going to the synagogue on the sabbaths. Take my friend Silverstein for instance. Silverstein goes to the synagogue to talk to God. I go to the synagogue to talk to Silverstein.”

A survey showed that only one fourth, about 25 percent, of Americans believe there is general concern for the needy in America. One researcher has studied people who do volunteer work with the needy and has found even among this small group there are

a variety of mixed motives often involved. Some volunteers for needy causes do so to go on an ego trip of being perceived as being generous, or heroic. Some are adventurers who happen to do charitable work just for the adventure of it. Some say they do it for self-esteem. But few say they do charitable work out for love. Those who say charity allows them to get to know people outside their own class often do not pursue that acquaintance very far. Our tendency is to volunteer to do good deeds; then when the deed is finished we become neither warm nor compassionate in our ordinary relationships. Another survey showed that

church goers are no more compassionate on average than non-church goers. But the essence of humanity is contained only in community and in the unity of one with another; in other words, the essence of humanity is in friendship.

The very word “friend” is from the Anglo-Saxon word, “freon,” which means “to love.” A friend is one whom we love. Love can exist only if it produces more love. We must be fruitful if we truly love.

We frequently say Jesus came to earth to give us salvation, to save us, to give us eternal life. But how often do we hear that Jesus came to earth to make us his friends?

Friends share in God's revelation. Being a friend of Jesus, however, is not having chumminess with Jesus; Jesus is not our Great Heavenly Pal. Jesus is still our Lord and our God. But he has lifted us to the great esteemed place of being his friends with whom he shares everything on earth and in heaven.

We are summoned to have a joyous confidence in the God who names us friends. We are called to a joyful obedience because of Jesus' perception of his followers as no longer slaves but friends. We are called into a joy-filled fellowship with all of God's children.

Thanks be to God who sent God's Son to make us friends of the Most High and Holy One. We have a new identity. We are friends! We shall never be alone!

Amen.