

St. Bartholomew's Church in the Town of Tonawanda, N.Y

The Rev. Fr. John E. Commins - Curate

Scripture: John 15:9-17

"Jesus: Friend of Sinners"

- * I wonder why it's such a compliment to tell a woman that she looks like "a breath of spring," but it's not to tell her she looks like "the end of hard winter." After all, isn't it the same thing?
- * I wonder why it gives a woman such joy when you tell her that "time stands still when you look into her face," -- but not to say that "her face would stop a clock." Why?
- * I wonder why people who punish a child for lying will invariably tell that same child, when the phone rings: "Just say I'm not home."
- * I wonder why, when the preacher says, "In closing..." he doesn't.
- * I wonder why a speaker who "needs no introduction" is going to get one anyway.

It all seems very curious to me!

There are many things in this world that can cause us to wonder. But one of the most incredible is that God Himself would want to call us His friends.

In John 15:14-15 Jesus said:

"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."

FRIENDS:

The fact that Jesus would call us His friends – to me- somehow defies the imagination. One of the biggest reasons it is difficult to imagine is because of what we find written in Romans 5:6-8 *"For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person-- though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us."*

AND YET, Bible's most famous and most potent scripture: John 3:16 tell us *"For God so... (pause and ask --what?) (loved the world). That's you and me!*

Let me put it to you this way --- let's replace the word "world" – with "me." **John 3:16:** *"For God so loved **me** that he gave his only Son, so that **I**, who believe in him may not perish but may have eternal life."*

Did you hear what you just said? Say it again --- *"For God so loved **me** that he gave his only Son, so that **I**, who believe in him may not perish but may have eternal life."* This is serious – this was a truly personal gift that Jesus, willingly, gave to you! And only you can choose to accept it or not. Deal or No Deal? It is by far the greatest treasure you will ever receive – from the best friend you could ever hope to have.

It is important for us to understand the context of where and why Jesus is saying these things to His disciples. These words were spoken by Jesus on the night before His death and crucifixion – in the upper room. Jesus never considered His disciples as slaves – who simply get ordered around, but instead He was sharing - with those He loves, His friends – and ultimately with us, His hopes and His plans. The Greek word for friend – φίλοι (*filoi*) – is closely related to the verb for love - φιλέω (*fileo*) – and it conveys a greater sense of intimacy than our modern day word for friend. Jesus has shared with them everything He heard from His Father, and we can see the disciples fulfilling the ideal of Abraham and Moses. Abraham was called God's friend – and God shared His plans for Sodom and Gomorrah. Moses

also was God's friend – and He like the disciples, would speak face to face with God. All that belongs to the Father belongs to Jesus and He has passed it all on to His disciples – His friends. There is nothing more to be known about the Father apart from Jesus and His resurrection. Jesus is the Way, the Truth, and the Life – and through Him – His followers – His friends will bear much fruit – thereby bringing Glory to the Father!

The Cross is the highest symbol of friendship.

John 15:13 tells us: "*No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends.*"

The symbol of the cross is so important to our relationships that God even used it for marriage:

Ephesians 5:25 "Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her." There is no greater love that we can show to another than to sacrifice for them.

Let me tell you what happened in Mr. Alter's fifth-grade class. It was 1994, in Oceanside California; if you were to peek in the window of the classroom it's impossible to tell which boy in that class is undergoing chemotherapy. All of the boys in the class are bald. Thirteen of them shaved their heads so that their sick friend wouldn't feel out of place.

"If everybody has their head shaved, sometimes people don't know who's who. They don't know who has cancer, and who just shaved their head" said 11-year-old Scott Sebelius, one of the baldies at Lake Elementary School. A young boy named Ian O'Gorman was the one with cancer.

Doctors had recently removed a malignant tumor from his small intestine, and a week later he started chemotherapy to treat the lymphoma.

All told he had to undergo 9 weeks of chemotherapy. Ian decided to get his head shaved before all his hair fell out. To his great surprise, his friends wanted to join him – just like the 1992 U.S. Olympic volleyball players, who shaved their heads in a show of solidarity with a bald teammate.

They didn't want him to not fit in, to be made fun of, so they just wanted to make him feel better and not left out. The boys went to the barber shop together – and got buzzed – literally!

Ian's father, Shawn and the boys' teacher, Jim Alter, were so inspired that they too shaved their heads.

The Cross is a symbol of Life in God's friendship.

In John 15:16 Jesus said. "*You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last*" You did not choose Him – but, my brothers and sisters – think of the significance- He chose you! We all know that you can't choose your relatives, but you can choose your friends – and here Jesus is reminding us that the Lord of the Universe thinks that each of us here are so precious and so special that He considers us not only family – but dear chosen friends.

The cross declares that God loves us so much that Jesus gave himself up in our place. Jesus chose of His own free will to step up and take our place and our punishment. He chooses us because He loves us – and wants to spend eternity with us. And that is why He gave Himself for us: **Remember what Jesus said:** "*No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends.*"(John 15:13)

1John 4:10 tells us "*This is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins.*"

In Choosing Us, God chose to GIVE US LIFE – eternal life with Him. That's why the resurrection naturally follows Christ's crucifixion. God could have said... "Oh, I think I'll wait till the end of time to raise Jesus from the dead," but He didn't.

In His Resurrection, Jesus provided the hope to all mankind that:

- He is just who He says He is, and that
- His Word is the Truth.

- Faith in Him as Lord in our lives means that we too will rise again –

If we recognize that we are sinners and ask Him to transform us to be more like Him. You have heard me say several times before in sermons: **God loves you just the way you are --- but He loves you too much to leave you that way.** Friends don't force themselves on one another – for forcing yourself on another is not friendship at all – or love for that matter – but it is something else entirely – something evil – it is called rape – and that is from the evil one – from Satan. God would never force himself upon anyone – and that is why He gives us the choice to respond to His choosing of us – to be His friend – to be in relationship with Him, to be His church – the Bride of Christ. True love is not evil – but is beautiful. It is not forced, it is not perverse – it follows God's plan from the beginning of time – as we read in the Scriptures. True love means recognizing our sins – and that those sins can separate us from our Lord. What is our response? That my friends is our choice- to repent or not!

Noted British Author and Anglican, C.S. Lewis defined friendship as this: "Friendship is born at that moment when one person says to another, "What! You, too? I thought I was the only one."

A friend is one who knows their own short comings. You see, there were these two men who were out hunting in the northern part of the U.S. Suddenly one man yelled and the other looked up to see a big old grizzly bear charging toward them. The first man started to frantically put on his tennis shoes and his friend anxiously asked, "What are you doing? Don't you know you can't outrun a grizzly bear?" He calmly replied "I don't have to outrun a grizzly. I just have to outrun you!"

The Cross is the symbol of what Jesus desires of us. Listen to these words from today's Gospel:

John 15:12 *"This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you."*

John 15:14 *"You are my friends if you do what I command you."*

John 15:17 *"I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another."*

The obedience that Jesus displayed going to the cross is the example for us to follow as we strive to follow and obey what Jesus asks of us. That means that we are not just to study and learn the Gospel – but we are to integrate what it says into our daily lives. We don't just talk the talk – but we are to walk the walk - to live the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

1John repeats this for us in chapter 3:16-18: *"We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us-- and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help? Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action."*

Jesus reiterates the same thing in John 13:35 *"By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."*

So then, why is this command repeated so often? BECAUSE the cross symbolizes the highest form of friendship. *"Take up your cross and follow me"* - nothing else can impress God as much as this.

In 1969, Supreme Court Justice Hugo L. Black celebrated his 83rd birthday

His colleague, frequent opponent and good friend, John Marshall Harlan, sent him a birthday letter. This is a simple gesture for most men, but Justice Harlan was almost totally blind. To sign a judicial opinion, it was necessary for him to turn on a massive set of lights that had been installed above his desk and use a large, single lens magnifying glass. With the glass pressed up near his eye – and almost touching the paper, he would struggle painfully just to complete his signature. Remarkably, it was the only writing he ever did.

The birthday note to Justice Black covered a whole page. When he had read it, Black folded it and put it carefully in his pocket, then turned his back on his clerk for a few minutes. When he turned around, his

eyes were full of tears. "He wrote it himself," he said.

The Gift of Self

There is no act we can do that can impress others as much as the gift of self. And no other kind of act will bring others to the Cross of Christ - who sacrificed Himself for each one of us.

Jesus wants each one of us to respond to the shining example that his disciples have laid out for us – which we can see fully evidenced throughout the entire Book of the Acts of the Apostles. They were first hand eye witnesses of Jesus' love evidenced by His healings, His preaching, His miracles, His death on the cross, and His compassion for all of those He loved. The disciples had seen firsthand how Jesus responded to His friends by the amazing reaction to the news that His friend Lazarus had died. The Gospel tells us that "*Jesus began to weep.*" (John 11:35) and then we all know how Jesus raised him for the dead – telling him "*Lazarus come out!*" (John 11:43) Jesus' love for His friends Lazarus, Martha, and Mary gave us a foretaste of the incredible love that He would display for us – those He called His friends – with His suffering and death on the cross – for the sins and transgressions of us – His friends – mere sinners. Jesus truly is the friend of sinners!

Our relationship with Jesus is one of love, loyalty and obedience – grateful obedience – to the one who has loved us more than we can begin to imagine. The test of that love, loyalty, and obedience remains the simple, profound, dangerous and difficult command: "*love one another as I have loved you.*"