

Learning How To Love
Sermon by Jerry Howe
New Song Church
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A story by Father Andrew Greeley:

Once upon a time there was certain bishop who was very proud of being a bishop. He was also very careful to see that everyone treated him with great respect because after all, he was one of the successors of the apostles, wasn't he? He didn't seem to remember what a stubborn, pig-headed, and difficult crowd the apostles were. He was upset whenever the acolytes at the masses he said around the diocese were not trained to

perfection. Some people thought he was a real jerk. Others thought he was a nice enough guy for a bishop but that he had a few obsessions that he would well get along without. So, one day, the sixth Sunday of Easter to be exact, he was saying a mass at a parish where a certain mother had warned her little girl not to offend the bishop. Well, the little girl was a feisty one and she wasn't afraid of the bishop or anyone else (few sixth-grade girls are.) So, when she was slow in bringing the towel for the washing of his hands and he snapped his fingers impatiently, she stopped in her tracks. Bring me the towel the bishop ordered. The feisty little girl remembered the Gospel and shouted right back. Don't

give me orders. I'm not a servant. I'm a friend. Everyone laughed. So, did the bishop. He hugged her and said of course she was a friend because she had the courage to tell him when he was making a fool out of himself. Then everyone applauded, and the bishop had learned a valuable lesson about what the church is.

Of course, I think this story can extend to us lower than bishops or the ordained.

At first glance today's Gospel seems easy enough. It is all about love. But as I contemplate this reading it becomes far more complex.

Why is love so challenging?

As I age I find that I tell people more often that I love them. Some of my friends think that it weakens its meaning when I say it too often. But at a certain age you have a different perspective about your mortality and what it means to leave kind words on said. So, I tell family and friends more often that they have had a special meaning in my life. And for some people it is a challenge to hear.

But in today's reading John is expanding on Jesus farewell speech to his apostles before he is to die on the cross. It is Jesus attempt to say farewell and let his disciples know that he loves them. After all the trials and tribulations, they have been through that they have

grown into friends. Or is this the last time for Jesus to teach one last lesson to them? The challenge to live a life as great as the love of God. And not just for themselves but for their neighbors as well.

One friend in my discussion of today's Gospel challenged me with the question do I think I can have a love as great as God? Followed by did God always love Jesus the way Jesus claims to love us? I must admit he stumped me with how to respond to these questions. I wanted to be like the feisty sixth grade girl in the story and proclaim. Hey, I am a friend. And then I wondered if he was like the bishop in the story. Of course, neither are the right response.

But today's Gospel is both a challenge and a gift. I know that I will never be able to come anywhere close to the Divine love of God or of Jesus. I have not to this point in my life had to discover if I had the courage to lay down my life for a friend or even the courage to point out some one's foolish ways. Well maybe on occasion I have pointed out what I thought were foolish ways.

Why is love so challenging? And I find myself with a challenge. Do I think I am a friend of Jesus? Do I allow my outward signs of service to appear to be the most important part of my faith that I forget to accept Jesus's friend request? And as I am writing this I wonder if we should start a Jesus Facebook page or other social media

page and see how many likes it may get. Was the bishop so busy being the perfect apostle descendant in service to God that he forgot the power of being a friend of God as well?

How would our worship service, our outreach and our stewardship look like if we not only attempted to emulate Gods love and our need to be his servants in this world but also as friends of God and Jesus?

This last year the company I work for worked for one of the free lunch programs in the area. It was a feel-good experience, but I found myself most comfortable working behind the counter in the kitchen area. Not ever upfront dealing with the clients. It was gratifying helping and

knowing that at least for one meal that day these people got a decent meal. But I know for a fact that I was just being a servant doing something I thought I needed to do. Not that this was sponsored by a religious group, but not once did I ponder God's love for these people let alone God's love for me. And how much different may these people have felt if they had felt Jesus friendship for them through me?

New Song is like a feisty sixth grade girl in the amount of out reach and service we so courageously do. And I admit that I probably don't always do my fair share. But I would love to know what motivates each of you to do what you do and why you do it? Is it to be of service to

God, to attempt to love like Jesus tells us to do. And to do it as a friend to God? Are we attempting to live up to the challenge that Jesus gives us today in John's Gospel to love one another? I never want us to stop doing all that we do. But are there ways we can do it better by what Jesus is telling us and challenging and teaching us to do in today's Gospel lesson.

Now I know that sharing the Father Greeley story at the beginning is an attempt to teach a lesson through humor. I also am aware that for many that the Sunday worship service is sacred territory. Like never talking bad about a friend's child or their best friend. But I know some of you could relate to the story of the bishop and his

temperament. A term I most often use is that they are a personality. And as soon as you hear the term you all come up with at least one person in your mind. And of course, it is the age-old discussion at New Song if the sharing of the peace is too friendly. But I am going to leave the image of worship service and personalities right here because I am not sure I can summon up my inner feisty girl to deal with it properly. I will just say for the more learned amongst us the next time you meet compare this Gospel reading to what we get right and what we can do better.

But there are two things I have left to resolve in my mind:

1. The bishop learned a valuable lesson about what the church is.
2. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for friends.

But here is where I need each of you to help me with resolving these two issues. In a world that daily seems to be ramping up hate can we daily ask ourselves am I doing my best to live up to loving each other as God and Jesus love us. In a world that daily becomes more hateful how can we stop the making of new martyrs in the world of women's rights, of LGBTQ rights, in the issues of racial justice and on and on? Can we daily ask ourselves are we living up to what God commands us to do? In a world

where people of faith stand diametrically opposed on issues how do we learn what the valuable issues of church are? And this final question leaves me stumped.

Do we need to remember that like the disciples we are stubborn, pig-headed and a difficult crowd ourselves at times? Are we always true friends to each other?

Why is love so challenging? But the gift maybe that it challenges us each day to try to live up to God's divine love and the love of Jesus for us. That if we attempt to follow Gods command of love one another that we may find a new way to reach across our differences to find a new respect and understanding. That are martyrdom may not be an actual death but a death of a

preconceived notion to discover new ways to make a difference. By challenging ourselves like the young girl to be a friend of Jesus and God and not just a servant we can grow and change what church can be. Now more than ever we need to live the life and lesson that Jesus challenge us as his chosen friends to be the best that we can be because Jesus existed.

And all of God's Children Say Amen...