

Jesus tells us, “*Friends, love one another as I have loved you.*” It sounds pretty simple, doesn’t it? But *of course*, it isn’t simple at all, as we all know, perhaps all too well.

A customer brought an exquisite greeting card to the counter. Scanning the card, the clerk said, “That will be seven dollars, please.” “*Seven dollars,*” he bellowed. “Forget it!” When the clerk returned the card to the rack, she noticed that it read, “To My Wife, Because You Mean So Much.”

“Love one another as I have loved you.” Loving like Jesus loves *is* expensive. Jesus loved us, and it cost him his life. Such love is costly for us, especially when we go to act on it and not just simply agree together that it would be a pretty good idea. It’s so easy to have our priorities, our actions and our assumptions misdirected; we too can end up like that poor customer who left the token of his undying love lying there abandoned on the counter.

Jesus commands us to love one another; so, here’s a question: if we love because of a command, are we just following orders? How can you command someone to love, anyway? Shouldn’t it be something offered freely? And if we are *forced* to love someone, under threat of some kind of holy court martial if we don’t, can we *really* even call it love? What about this love we have through Jesus?

Jesus says, “you are my friends if you do what I command you.” Is this like the little kid on the playground who says, “*I’ll be your friend if you give me what I want?*” Notice that Jesus *doesn’t* say, “love me *so then* I will love you.” God doesn’t check out our love to see if it is good enough to make us worthy of being loved.

Jesus also *does not* command us to “Love me *because*, after all, I loved you first.” I’ve heard this sort of thing called “creative guilt management.” It turns the good news of God’s gracious love into the nagging of yet another accusing voice. It manages to make Gospel into Law, to turn a Promise into a Demand. It might produce obedience, but not joy.

Does God force us to love? No, we can curl in on ourselves and turn our backs on God and our neighbor. And God will continue to love us, no matter what. We can turn away from that love and fail to benefit from it; but connected to Jesus, and re-connected to Jesus, we’re invited in on God’s loving plan for healing the world. Now, that’s something! Jesus calls his followers *friends, not slaves*. God’s mission runs on love and produces healing and joy.

“*No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.*” Jesus chose us as friends not because we were so clever or attractive and deserving. Jesus chose us because, amazingly, he loves us, no matter what we have done or failed to do. Jesus wants to share his joy with us. Jesus calls us friends, and not slaves. A slave takes on a task or a relationship because, well, it’s commanded. A friend, however, is in on the larger picture. A slave takes on a task. Friends can freely invest in the vision.

When I was in the seminary, a group of us students would make money by helping to cater private parties. As we poured the champagne or passed the canapés, as we cleaned the icky ashtrays or tended the hot steam table, we knew we were “the help,” and not the invited guests. How different *those* events were from our pot-luck dinners. Here we were friends, each welcomed, each valued, each bringing something and sharing what the others had to offer. Catering a party as the hired help brought a paycheck. Sharing a party as friends fed our bodies and spirits and brought us joy.

Jesus has invited us to the table, and each of us has been given something of importance to bring to the party, a gift to pass along to those around us. Jesus says, “Hang in there with me; abide in me as you love the ones I send to you.” That loving our neighbors is powered by God’s love for us.

Love one another, as I have loved you. That doesn’t *just* mean that we should love others in the *same way* that God loved us -- making God into merely a good example for our behavior. Of course, it’s not that we *shouldn’t* follow our Lord’s good example. It’s just that a *good example isn’t enough*. So, try this reading instead: Jesus says, *as you are in the process of receiving my love, go ahead and pay it forward--pass that very love that you have received along to others*. Drawing only on our own hearts, none of us *could* love *just like* God loved us. We can love freely because we have received the love of Christ Jesus, crucified, and risen; we love as we are receiving that love, and it is only multiplied, not divided.

Mother’s Day is coming up next week. It’s a day when we recognize the importance of this love in our own families. Children have a hard time growing up to be loving adults without receiving unconditional love as children. As *God’s* children, we bear God’s good fruit when our lives pass along the love we have abiding in Jesus. God chose us for this, and has promised to make it happen through us as we offer ourselves and our gifts to God.

God’s love comes first and that love is what we draw on when we begin to obey the command to love each other. As difficult as that may be at times, loving those around us helps us to enact and enrich our friendship with Jesus. Jesus laid down his life for us. Not many of us are called to actually sacrifice our life to express our love for others. Such love, when it appears, gives powerful witness to the abiding Spirit of Christ.

One of the places in the Holy Land that I visited was the Holocaust Museum in Jerusalem. Trees were planted there to honor Righteous Gentiles who helped Jews during that time. There’s an incident about one those Righteous Ones honored there at the Museum. It is set in the Ravensbrück concentration camp where 92,000 women and children died during World War II.

Imagine a group of women lined up for the gas chamber. It is Good Friday. One of them becomes hysterical. From the crowd of other women not chosen for death that day, a figure emerges and approaches the woman broken by fear and hysteria, and says, “*It’s alright. It’s alright. I’ll take your place.*” That woman was Elizabeth Pilenko. She came from a wealthy, land-owning family in the south of Russia and eventually had become a nun and worked among the poor.

During the war, her convent became a haven for Jews. When the Gestapo came to the convent, Mother Maria (as Elizabeth Pilenko was called) was arrested and sent to Ravensbrück. There she made a lasting impression, and even the *guards* spoke of her as “that wonderful Russian nun.” *It’s alright. I’ll take your place.* There is a true Good Friday echo of the One who took our place on a cross.

Death and cruel indifference to our neighbor are marked for defeat wherever the loving Spirit of Jesus lives within his followers. Resurrection is celebrated wherever God’s people meet the many shocks of daily life with courage, patience, trust, and love. Trusting God and loving the neighbor is the fruit of the life of Christ abiding in us. And *forgiveness* is the shock absorber that allows us to ride together on a road that is full of potholes and ruts, dangerous twists, and unexpected turns. Jesus says “*love one another as I have loved you,*” and he also says “*forgive one another as I have forgiven you.*” Two sides of the same coin, they are God’s power for life abundant in a very broken world.

God’s love and forgiveness are showered on us, not so that we would just take those blessings for granted, and not just hang on to them for ourselves, but so that we could joyfully pass along that love and forgiveness. God has given us each something to bring to the table. Let us put those precious gifts to work and help each other identify and multiply the particular gifts and strengths of each one. God will bring forth fruit in the process, turning anxiety into creative patience, sadness into joy, weariness into life abundant. Let us love one another as our Lord is loving us, so that we bear the fruits of that freed love through our life together.

God’s up to something, and we’re in on it! Thanks be to God.