

## ***6 Sunday Easter, B***

I suppose there is no higher compliment that one human being can pay to another than to call him or her “my friend.” Isn’t it strange that we often take friendship for granted and treat it casually, as though it was nice but not really necessary?

The truth is that no human relationship is all it ought to be until it has been elevated to the level of friendship. You and I may be neighbors, in the sense that we live close; but that can be problematical unless we are also friends. A man and a woman may start as young lovers and become husband and wife; but that can become boring or even painful, unless somewhere along the way they also become friends. Perhaps the nearest and dearest of all human relationship is the bond of birth and blood between parents and their children. But that natural relationship will fall short of fulfillment unless it grows into a spiritual relationship where father and mother, son and daughter learn out this blend of respect and affection, loyalty and trust that ties people together in friendship.

Today’s Gospel reading reminds us that the relationship between Jesus and his disciples achieved that kind of fulfillment. In an upper room somewhere in Jerusalem, the night before his death, he said to them, “There is no greater love than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.” Then he added, “I no longer speak of you as slaves; instead, I call you friends.” That was our Lord’s interpretation of the cross – no wordy theology, no boring theory of atonement, just a simple statement about laying down one’s life for one’s friends.

Think, first, of its importance to Jesus, himself. It was a terribly difficult time for the young Prophet from Galilee. By human standards, his ministry had been a failure. For the most part his message had fallen on deaf ears. His

followers were few; his enemies were powerful. People of authority were determined to silence his preaching and teaching. The outcome was inevitable – he was going to die.

He faced those trying circumstances with a strength and courage that was superhuman, but he did one thing that was very human – he turned to his friends. Trouble has a way of reducing life to these basics. When all is well, we may want and wish for many things; but when serious trouble enters the scene; our desires become few and simple. Most of all we want the reassuring presence of a few close friends.

So it was with Jesus that night in Jerusalem. In time of trouble, he, like us, turned to his friends. As they sat at the table, he said, “I have greatly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer,” Then remembering days gone before, he said to them, “You are the ones who have stood by me in temptations.” At some point in the evening, he talked with God about them, saying: “For these I pray – not for the world, but for these you have given me. O Father most holy protects them with your name. I do not ask you to take them out of the world, but to guard them from the evil one.” Later, after celebrating the sacred feast, they left the upper room and went to the Garden of Gethsemane, where he virtually pled with them to stay close, to stay awake, and to pray with him.

Commonly, we think of Jesus as a tower of strength on whom we can depend in time of need, and there is truth in that thought. The writer, George Matheson, spoke the sentiments of many, when he said, “Son of Man, whenever I doubt of life, I think of you.” Our need for Christ is, to some of us, indisputably evident. But our Gospel reading tells the other side of the story. That final week in Jerusalem as the cross came closer and appeared larger, Jesus, himself needed help. And in those hours, he proved his kinship

with you and me by reaching out to his friends. We know, of course, that they failed him, which is sad but long-since forgiven. Our challenge now is to see to it that we do not fail those who turn to us in time of need. When people face real trouble, nothing means more than the nearness of a true friend.

Come further now and consider for a moment how Jesus described his cross in terms of friendship: “There is no greater love than to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.”

At first glance that may seem a limited view of the cross. Is it not true that Christ died for us all? One of those who sat at the table that night would later write: “he is an offering for our sins, and not for ours only, but for those of the whole world.” The inclusiveness of the cross has been a basic part of the Christian gospel from the beginning, yet on that night before he died, Jesus affirmed that he was laying down his life for his friends.

I think there are two reasons for that. The first is that the cross is a very personal thing. Jesus wanted each of those men to know and never forget that he was dying for them. He wants us to know the same thing. Had we been in the upper room that night, he would have said the same thing to us. In fact, we can narrow it down even more – had you or I been the only one there, he would have said the same thing to either of us. Paul had the true picture when he spoke of “the Son of God who loves me and gave himself for me.” You and I will never know the full meaning of the cross until we understand it in terms that are just that personal.

The other reason I had in mind is one that brings Jesus close to us in a very human sense. Whenever we are discouraged about the human race as a whole, when saving the world just doesn’t seem worth the effort, where do we turn to have our faith renewed? You know the answer to that question as

well as I – we turn to our friends, that small segment of humanity in whom we believe and who believe in us. It would be utterly impossible for us to believe in the human race as a whole, if we had no friends.

Would it be unreasonable to assume that the same was true with Jesus? After all, his world was at least as bad as ours. Look at what it did to him. How could he be willing to die for a world that treated him the way it did? At least part of the answer is this: He had found in that world a few people who believed in him and in whom he believed with his whole heart. They were far from perfect, but he had seen in them some sure signs of redemption, so much so that he called them, “the light of the world and the salt of the earth.” So he carried the cross to Calvary for the whole world, but he was thinking of that world in terms of his friends. They were worth dying for.

Let’s conclude our thought now by recognizing that friendship is the only power on earth that can truly conquer a person.

Ordinarily, we think of friendliness as something that is gentle and kind, and that it is. But today we are thinking of it in terms of power – its power to sustain us in the face of trouble, its power to undergird for times of sacrifice, and finally its power to conquer the human heart. We live in a world that is very unstable. In that kind of world, we need to remind ourselves that the only power that can conquer the human heart is friendship.

The reason for this is evident. The essential nature of friendship is that it does things for us, which we cannot require. Much of life is not that way. We do a week’s work; we have the right to expect our salary. We pay our money; we expect goods or services in return. But friendship enters our lives and gives us that, which we cannot require. A friend loves us when we do not deserve it. A friend forgives us when we cannot demand it. A friend

believes in us even when we cannot believe in ourselves. That is friendship at its best, and it is the only power on earth that can truly conquer a human heart.

Friendship is the weapon with which Christ has taken possession of our lives, and it is the weapon with which he sends us forth to conquer the world. **Amen.**