

A Sermon Preached by  
Fr. Edwin Smith for Easter5, year B  
May 10, 2009 at St. Thomas, Menasha, Wisconsin

In the early church, there were hermits who lived in the desert and practiced a special spirituality. They were called desert fathers, or desert masters. Their wisdom was often sought by believers, because they devoted their entire lives to seeking God and his wisdom.

There is a story from the tales of the desert masters. According to this particular story, "One day, as he began his daily prayer, a desert master saw pass by him a cripple, a beggar, and a beaten man. Seeing them, the holy man went deep into prayer and cried, 'Great God! How is it that a loving creator can see such suffering and yet do nothing about it?' And out of the depth of prayer, God said, 'I have done something about it. I made you.'"

Here, in the words of the story, we hear echoes of Jesus' words in today's Gospel lesson, "My command is this: love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends."

He goes on to say 'You are my friends if you do what I command. I no longer call you servants ...instead, I have called you friends...'

With these words, he invokes a radical new spiritual order which closes the chasm between God and humans. He invites the disciples and us into the full communion and fellowship of friendship, and he leaves this as our example for relationships with one another.

Growing up, one of my favorite hymns was "What a friend we have in Jesus." I have since been told by those who know more than I about these things that the tune is weak, the message overly sentimental, and theologically shallow.

It may be all those things, but it's still a favorite of mine! However, I would add to all that criticism that it is also a dangerous hymn. At least, it is dangerous if we take seriously the understanding of what it means it means to be a friend of Jesus that we find in John's gospel.

"If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love." "You are my friends if you do what I command you."

"O.k.," we say, "How hard can that be? Well, it is hard, indeed. He goes on to say, "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."

The cost of his friendship with us is nothing less than our willingness to lay down our lives for each other. Friendship with Jesus is not a sentiment, it is a relationship, and it involves commitment.

Suppose someone says they are your friend, but when you are sick, they do not visit. When you are lonely, they do not come. When you are distressed, they do not care. When you are joyful, they care more about their own life, and are jealous of your joy. They say they are your friend, but they are not a true friend.

Neither are we, if we do not visit the sick, come to the lonely, or share in each other's joy. Being true friend means becoming involved in the life of another; what matters to them matters to us.

It should matter so much that we are willing to lay aside our own lives for each other. To put aside our own cares and our own concerns, seeking only the best for each other. And, if ever circumstances call for it, the willingness to actually lay down our own life.

In her book, a simple path, Mother Teresa wrote:

“People are unreasonable, illogical, and self-centered. If you do good, people will accuse you of selfish ulterior motives; do good anyway. If you are successful you win false friends and true enemies; succeed anyway. The good you do will be forgotten tomorrow; do good anyway. Honesty and frankness make you vulnerable; be frank and honest anyway.

What you spent years building may be destroyed overnight; build anyway. People really need help but attack you if you help them; help people anyway.

Give the world the best you have and you'll get kicked in the teeth; give the world the best you've got anyway.”

Jesus is like that with us, too. His friendship goes beyond the ordinary. He loves us and cares about us, not because of what we do, but in spite of what we do, or do not do. He offers that friendship to us continuously. The key word is “offers.” Jesus doesn't force his friendship on us. He offers it. It's up to us to accept it--to say “Jesus, I want to be your friend, too.”

And that's the kind of friendship we are to offer others. A love and caring that goes beyond the ordinary. That looks beyond what people say or do, or do not do, and says, “I'm here for you, because Jesus is here for both of us.”

Maybe that's why some experts find that old hymn weak, and the message overly sentimental and theologically shallow. Maybe, in reality, it's just too simple--to up-front--just like Jesus' love for us.

I don't know about you, but I'm glad it's that way.

By the way, there is no visual for the sermon this morning, because the only visual for the love we should have for others is action.