

## “God’s Friends”

Acts 10:44-48 I John 5:1-6 John 15:9-17

Scott B. Martin - May 17, 2009

Last week we looked at John’s message that “God is love”. This love is most clearly seen in the Christ’s willingness to die on a cross. Love is perhaps most clearly revealed in “sacrifice.” Since last week was mother’s day we looked at the sacrificial love of mothers and the light this sacrificial love can shed on God’s sacrificial love and God’s call to love one another. This week John pursues his theme further, saying, **“No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.”** John then goes on to say that because God has befriended us we are to befriend others in God’s name.

Before we get any farther we need to stop for a moment and say a word about how this text has been misused. British theologian, N.T. Wright points out that his text was used in WWI in sermons, lectures and was put to music to be sung by great choirs, all with the point of encouraging young men to go and die for their country in the Great War. Tens of thousands of young men were persuaded to do just that.

Wright says, “God honours, I believe, the self-sacrifice and dedication of those who sincerely and devoutly believed they were doing their duty. But I also believe God judges those who use texts like this as a convenient rhetorical trick to put moral pressure on other people, when what was needed was a bit of moral pressure on themselves to ask: Why are we doing this at all? If we must have a war, is this really the best way of fighting it? Are these ‘**sacrifices**’ (another convenient ‘religious’ word; people spoke of ‘the final sacrifice’, forgetting that in the Bible human sacrifice was condemned

over and over again) the best way both of winning the war and of preparing ourselves for the world that will need rebuilding after it's all over?" All of these are very good questions are they not?

This is certainly a good example of a Biblical text being terribly misused. In fact one might say using this text in such a fashion twists it beyond all recognition. After all the text is essentially about "making love not war", to borrow a phrase from the 1960's.

It has been correctly said "that you cannot legislate morality." To paraphrase this, "you cannot legislate love." Love, by nature, can not be forced. Love can only be called forth. Love can only arise as a gift. Love can be nurtured, but it cannot be forced. Even God, with all of God's awesome power, cannot force human beings to love each other or even to love him/her.

Now if you were paying attention to the Scripture reading you may be sitting there saying, "But didn't the Scripture say, '**This is my commandment, that you love one another...**'" Yes, it did say that, but pay close attention to how this "commandment" is couched. Notice how often Jesus says things like this:

- I have loved you (verse 15:9a)
- as I have loved you (verse 15:12)
- you are my friends
- I call you friends (15:14)
- I chose you (15:16)

We are told to "abide in my love" (15:9). That is the key point John is making. The weight of this passage does not fall on God commanding us to love. We are called to "abide", to live in, the love

of the Christ. The end result of this is that not only will the world be a better place, we will experience greater “JOY”. In verse 11 Jesus says, **“I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that YOUR joy may be complete.”** A more joy filled life can be found by abiding in God’s love.

One of the most terrifying visions of the world was depicted in George Orwell’s great book, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. In this book the nation is ruled by “Big Brother”. He rules by being an oppressive totalitarian dictator. He uses double-speak and misrepresentation to manipulate the population. At the horrifying conclusion of the book he commands people to love him. The population and even our initially resisting hero give in and “love” Big Brother, without reservation. What makes this so terrifying is that in that moment we know that these humans have ceased to be truly human.

Clearly there is no joy at the end of 1984. There is no love in the true sense of the word. We do not learn whether or not Big Brother cares. He seems to be mostly interested in staying in power and bending people to his will. One wonders how long this would continue. These are empty trinkets compared to the joy of experiencing love and sharing love. Certainly the world Big Brother creates is a joyless, fearful, zombie like world, filled with people going about their business with no sense of joy or fulfillment.

This is not the world that Jesus was trying to create. Jesus was seeking to nurture a more loving, a more joyful, a more grace filled world, where a true loving community would replace the cold detachment of empire and self-interest.

In our concluding verse today Jesus tells us, **“You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. (15:16)** God cannot force us to love, but what this passage suggests is that when we love we are abiding in God’s will and hopes for the world. When we do this something amazing is released. We will produce long lasting fruit. We will be able to do so because in an awesome and mysterious way we will be able to access the very power of God. In ways we cannot fully understand we will be working with God not against God’s greatest hopes for the world.

Last week’s Christian Century has a story about a town in Central Mexico in which many of the townspeople seem to embody the lessons of John 15. The name of the town is Fortin de las Flores. This town of 20,000 is located in a pass that leads past Mexico’s highest peak, Pico de Orizaba. Because it is near this pass one of Mexico’s most important railroad lines passes through town, connecting the jungles of southern Mexico with the northern deserts and the United States border.

Every day numerous trains pass through town. Every day, along with their designated cargo these trains carry men, women, youth and children stowing away, heading north to the border and the hopes of a job and a new life in the United States. It is a hazardous journey. The stowaways are often robbed of the few possessions they have, beaten, and raped along the arduous route they take. They are far from home, friends and loved ones. They are strangers and often foreigners, even in Mexico, coming from Honduras or Guatemala, or El Salvador.

The people of Fortin de las Flores are not wealthy or even middle class by Mexico City standards, let alone our standards. Yet many of the people of Fortin de las Flores repeatedly take food, water, and clothes down to the railroad line to give to the hundreds of thousands of migrants passing through. Amy Frykholm read about this amazing town in Sonia Nazario's book *Enrique's Journey* and decided to visit this town and see it for herself.

Let's meet some of the citizens of Fortin de las Flores. Benita Juarez is 84 and lives near the railroad tracks. She is 84. If the train slows down she will send a grandchild to the train to give the migrants packets of food and water. Frykholm was sitting in the Juarez living room and she asked them how they can "afford" to keep doing this day after day. Inez, one of Benita's daughters looked puzzled at this question and simply said, "Right now, we're eating. When we are finished, there will be a little left over. That we can **pass along**." Frykholm says she found this attitude over and over again. People didn't talk about "giving food away". They seemed to believe that the food didn't really belong to them in the first place, that they were simply "passing it along" to others who needed it.

Ciro Gonzales and his wife Erika Hernandez run a small café across from the railroad tracks. Nearly everyday migrants come to the café looking for food. They always come away with something, a torta with meat, chicken, or beans, a few tacos, a bag of chicharones. Even if the migrants have money he won't take accept it!

Gonzales said, "they come through every day". He said this without any hint of resignation or frustration. He says it to emphasize that is a normal event in this town and in his café. He is amazed that

Frykholm is so surprised and thinks it so extraordinary. Clearly, for him “feeding the stranger is as basic as feeding one’s own family”, says Frykholm.

Gonzales son Jose Romero invited Frykholm across the street to his mother’s courtyard and dinner. They said the people of Fortin de las Flores identify with the migrants and the many obstacles they face. When asked if they ever worry if they will have enough for themselves if they keep helping and helping and helping, Romero’s wife Maura responds, “Whatever we give, God multiplies. We help because they are suffering more than we are.”

Hugo Perez lived and worked in Appleton, Wisconsin, on a work visa, for six years. He moved back to Fortin de las Flores despite the good money he was making in the U.S. He did so because he missed what Fortin de las Flores had to offer, a different kind of abundance. He said the central value of Fortin was “*compartir*” to share. He said that businesses in Fortin were first and foremost a “place from which to share.” Contrast this with the phrase often heard by business owners in the U.S. “This is not a charity. It’s a business.”

This doesn’t mean that the people of Fortin de las Flores don’t get burned sometimes when they help strangers, they do. Aurora Flores and Abisai Osorio run a small café. They once took in a stranger in their house. He turned out to be a drug dealer. When asked if they would take in another migrant, they said, “We would, if the circumstances were right. But we have lost a little confidence.”

They may have lost confidence for taking migrants into their home but they still give out food to all comers at their café. Aurora described with great passion some of the horror stories she has heard

from the migrants who come to her café, “Real ugly things happen along the way.” When asked again why she helps, she shrugs and says, “It’s a good thing to do. It’s how we are taught. We like to do it. There’s one part of the Bible that says to feed and clothe people.” Truly many of the citizens of Fortin de las Flores are “Friends of God.”

In just three weeks I will be making my 14<sup>th</sup> trip to Tijuana, to Esperanza. Truly I get more from these trips than I give. Each year I am inspired by others who have very little, who give very much, to others in great need. What is it the Gospel of John says, “I have said these things to you so that my JOY may be in you, and that your JOY may be complete. Amen.