

Second Sunday after Trinity—6-13-2021 I John 3: 13ff Luke 14: 16ff

+In the Name of the Triune God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. Amen+

Did you get all of the first lesson this morning? Were you able to follow the message and track with the author in a way that is clear and understandable? If not, you aren’t alone. It is a powerful message with layers of meaning, but the core will unfold as we live out our life as a community formed by God’s care.

Several years ago a theological conference was scheduled in a nice retreat center far away from all the noise of running news programs and beyond reach of the first generation of cellphones. The setting was intended to create an atmosphere conducive to careful listening and reflection. The initial speaker was erudite, intelligent, and obviously used the thesaurus numerous times in preparation. In fact, there were words uttered that had to have been dusted off, because they had not seen the light of day in a century! Even the brightest in the crowd began to shift in seats, look pensively at watches, and yearn for the words “and finally”... Seizing the situation one of the bishops present came to the microphone and with a smile broke the mood with one sentence. “What he meant was this.” The place erupted. It reminded me of my advisor from graduate school who told a research class, “It is not necessary to be incomprehensible to be profound, but you may need an interpreter.” How often have any of us, in the heat of attempting to be understood by another, needed someone else to reframe our communication so we could be heard?

Once again this morning we hear from the Epistle of I John who weaves a narrative about death and life, the world and the little community striving to live in faith, and the call to see that love as defined by God is the only future that has life in it. It is quite likely that this letter is an interpretation, a reframing of John’s Gospel for people who are struggling to live in worlds, both internal and external, that often contradict what they believe and hold true. While the letter takes multiple twists and turns, what it really means is this: 1) God has chosen to reveal His life to us and Jesus is the revealer; 2) The content of that disclosure is God is in love with us, wants us to be in love with Him, and we are given the gift of being commanded to love one another because that is where we will discover how to love God. Loving God is never dislocated from the sinews of those with whom we live.

Our passage starts with a startling claim: “We **have passed** from death into life, (that is the transition from death—in the perfect tense which is irreversible) because **we love** (present tense) the brethren—our neighbor”. The context for this is a story as old as human memory. It is the drama of Cain and Abel; of jealousy and envy, of placing pride above compassion, and it has not come to closure. The names may change, but the realm of darkness remains. I John is not suggesting that physical death stops. Rather the message is the world with its self-absorption, greed, avarice, and displacement of God in life is a place of decay, and that hatred and injury cannot sustain fullness of life. That should not be very hard to believe if one views the violence and interactions that degrade human existence in daily occurrences. I John equates hatred with murder in that it removes from others the dignity granted us by being made in the image of God. Hate literally robs people of life. When we treat our neighbors as objects to be used or discarded at leisure we participate in that robbery. The dark side of human moments is when they become inhuman; less than what we have been made to be. The fledgling community to

which this Epistle is addressed lived in a world not unlike our time. They will not find support there for the message by which they live, but within and among the faithful there is another world at work. It is the world of God’s love seeking to transform them, and the world which is broken by sin. They knew, as do we, that true life is possible when God abides in us, and we abide in God and one another. This is the opposite of living in a culture of death. Those who chose love have turned their back on death. “We have passed from death to life....”

Let us ask and explore for a few moments what it means practically to love one another in light of God’s already present unconditional gift through Jesus. “We perceive the love of God, because he laid down his life for us”. Do you think of yourself as being worthy of such a gift? We may not be worthy, but God has counted us as such. In the face of that picture we are called to ‘lay down’ our lives. What the word means here is not dying physically, but risking, stretching our-selves, for the sake of another without seeking return. It is to live in *caritas*—charity—which is God’s gift. That is our beginning and our *telos*-goal.

I want to suggest to you that when the church—this parish—any community abides in God’s love it becomes a school for Christian charity, Christian Friendship. This becomes a place and set of relationships where our spiritual formation is in constant development. And the means of that growth is the gift of learning to love one another. St. Augustine commented, “Friends are gifts entrusted to us for the providential purposes of God.” They are a means toward loving God and not a distraction or disturbance.

In his book on Friendship and Moral Life, Fr. Paul Waddell reflects, “My high school years were a little different. And I don’t regret a minute of them.”. “In the fall of 1965 I left my home in Louisville to join nearly two hundred other fellows at a high school seminary in a small Missouri town called Warrenton.... We were a ragtag bunch who clustered together in the most unlikely of settings to be initiated into a way of life designed to help us discover whether or not we ought to become Passionist priests....

“Although we did not realize it at the time, the pink stucco building that was our home for four years was a school of friendship; and friendship, at its best, is a school of Christian love. In a life ordered by prayer and worship, we learned there how turning our attention to God helped us to be more attentive to one another. In a place where none of us had very much, we learned how sharing and generosity build friendships, and why a life centered on Christ is the key to nurturing genuine friendship and intimacy among ourselves. We did not choose each other, but we were given one another and entrusted with one another. Each of us was the ‘neighbor’ all of us were called to love. And although we could not articulate it at the time, this meant helping one another grow in holiness by together moving closer to God”. “We have passed from death to life”, and the mean is the grace of loving.

Let’s be clear what we are exploring in terms of Christian Friendship. Aelred of Rievaulx, Abbot of the English Cisterian monastery (beautiful setting and ruins) in the 12<sup>th</sup> century wrote a book called Spiritual Friendship. It is done in a dialogue style between Aelred and other speakers. Where he leads the conversation is to compare 3 types of friendships in which we engage, because not all are of the same quality. One he calls carnal. These are the ones that deaden our conscience. They play on our weaknesses and pull us into behaviors that are harmful to us and others. It may be gossip or participation in activities that detract us from a good life, that is wholeness. Second he talks of ‘worldly friends’, which, if we move beyond the quaint

label, is referring to those who are self-serving and create alliances in order to gain what they can from them. I have known people to join parishes solely because it provides an opportunity to get ahead by connecting with people who can benefit them. It isn't that they do not care at some level, but there is usually an imbalance that leads them to take far more than they give.

They are distinguished from 'spiritual friendship'. These are relationships in which people come to treasure one another for their own sakes. They are people drawn to be together by their love of Christ and a desire to grow more into the image God has placed on us all. They know it is not easy and the foundation of such love is binding commitment to God and one another, and that we can through such friendships become schooled in faith and charity made real in love.

The Christian way is marked by the good life. Not plenty in material, but plenteous in virtue and care. It can never, never be lived in isolation. God the Trinity is a community, and so are we. If we are to live such a life friendship is necessary. Second such friends orient and direct us toward goodness and truth and away from false narratives. Third, our friends our gifts from God who are the means for us to discover what real love is. And finally, these people in our lives are necessary if we are not to lose our way and wander into stories that malform us.

I John does not spell this out in the language I have used. It is far more eloquent as is fitting of Scripture. But the message is clear. To love and abide in God is most certainly found when in Christian charity and friendship we abide in each other. Amen+