



SAINT LUKE'S

"GREATER LOVE"

EASTER 6

ACTS 10:44-48

PSALM 98

1 JOHN 5:1-6

JOHN 15: 9-17

A SERMON BY THE REV. CAROLINE STACEY

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Jesus says to us: *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. You are my friends if you do what I command you. ...I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my father...*

On Thursday of this week I was at Vassar College, for a site visit of the Diocesan Campus Ministry Committee. It was a beautiful day. We gathered to plan and to hear the Chaplains' latest successes and their challenges. The Director of Spiritual Life at Vassar was also there. He shared some wonderful news of a new Muslim chaplaincy on campus. Then the Dean and the Episcopal Chaplain talked about the high anxiety on campus. Among students and faculty, everyone. Generalized anxiety passing from group to group, running through the campus like an electric current.

I heard the same thing at a recent School Board meeting here at St. Luke's School. Parents are anxious - and not usually about material things. Faculty are anxious. And of course this high level of diffuse anxiety gets picked up by the children as an amorphous malaise.

This is our American context today. Rapid, unpredictable, global change and global news 24/7 in the palm of our hands make us all anxious. How could we not be? The lines are not as clear as in the Second Century of John's gospel. The spiritual struggle is more diffuse. We are in a culture that is post-Christian, thinks it knows the gospel

and dismisses our faith as a therapeutic crutch, ineffective against today's real problems. I disagree. The gospel is the most profound antidote to anxiety given to humanity in any age. The gospel offers friendship with Jesus and a share in Jesus' own life and mission.

What electric currents need for containment is grounding. Electricity needs harnessing to become constructive. On campuses and in cities, we can offer a different kind of presence in the world: thoughtful, steady, listening; a place of renewal from the panicky pace of our time. Jesus offers a different way of being and seeing the world, through non-anxious eyes of love and availability. This counter-cultural way has to begin with us, with our choice of how to approach the challenges of each day. It cannot depend on our lives being problem-free. We all have worries on our minds most days: job, family, personal things. Then we layer on city emergencies, national emergencies and international crises. We cannot directly control or solve many of those things on a daily basis.

What we *can* choose is the day in front of us, and how to live and respond to others. We can choose to be kind and faithful. Staying close to the essentials - prayer, Scripture, sacraments, doing small things to be helpful to others and useful to God. We can choose not to transmit anxiety or meanness. We can choose to neutralize or disconnect gossip chains by not passing it on. We can earth negativity with something that communicates: I hear you but none of us is perfect and there is also good here.

This may sound like mere positive-thinking. Too feeble, not rugged enough to be called discipleship. Until we remember that Jesus didn't seem rugged or world-conquering as he accepted the Cross. Until we remember that the Cross itself seems a defeat and weakness and that God *chooses what is foolish in the world's eyes to shame the wise; God chooses what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chooses what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are.*¹ Paul - a first century Christian who died before John's gospel was even written down - Paul was the pioneer evangelist who grasped this very clearly. If the church today tries to take on the world and its shiny ways on the world's terms and the world's language and success ethic we will look ridiculous. The world will always appear more shiny and sophisticated than the humble gospel. But something that confounds the world is a different approach to life altogether. Live like Jesus by offering your whole self - the good, the not so good - offer yourself and your gifts - open-handedly in service to others. Every day, do some modest acts of service - if possible, unnoticed. (We need not worry about praise or credit. It's not about us.) This is counter-cultural. The truth is, the closer we are to doing simple, modest acts of love every day, finding ways to serve those God has placed in our lives, the more centered and connected to Jesus's life we will be.

No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. Jesus will indeed literally lay down his life. But it is the Last Supper and Jesus has also just washed the disciples' feet when he says this. The heroic

¹ 1 Corinthians 1:27ff.

and the grungy; connected because they are both done from love. *No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends.* We instinctively group folks in categories to make their needs and our responsibility to help feel more manageable: in the center immediate family, then the next circle out is perhaps good friends, then colleagues at work, then people in the wider community, then those we should help because our faith commands it. Grouping people helps us from feeling overwhelmed by others' needs. Jesus expands our definition of friend. *Who is my neighbor?*⁷ asks the lawyer who prompts the parable of the Good Samaritan. That parable implies the response: Anyone in need is my neighbor. *Who is my friend?* we might ask. The answer of love is: every human being. Every human being is my friend. Jesus isn't meaning friend-as-buddy, based on common interests. By friendship, Jesus means what he shows us; something much more universal. A willingness to serve without discrimination or criteria of worthiness.

Jean Vanier in 1964 founded the L'Arche Communities, where people with special needs live with their caregivers in a single community. Vanier writes powerfully about John's gospel. He says: "To love people as Jesus loves them is to wash their feet, to serve them in humility; it is to help them rise up in truth and love...To love is to lay down one's life for others, to place their interests before our own. It is to give them life. That can mean accepting difficulties, danger and even death so that they may live and grow in love. To live is to live in

⁷ Luke 10:29

communion with others... It is to reveal to them that they are loved, loved by Jesus. Jesus has come to offer us his friendship, to invite us to become his beloved...and to join him in giving life to others".³

AMEN

³ Jean Vanier: Drawn into the Mystery of Jesus through the Gospel of John

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