

To help us get focused today, here's a quote from our patron saint, Francis of Assisi. He said, "God came to my house and asked for charity. And I fell on my knees and cried, "Beloved, what may I give?" "Just love," God said. "Just love."

During the Season of Easter, particularly in this latter portion of it as we hear Jesus preparing his disciples for his departure from them at his Ascension, the readings call us to focus on love, both God's love for us and our love for one another. The first is a gift of free and radical generosity, given to us whether we think we deserve it or not. It's a gift that is never taken back from us, yet we must be reminded of it constantly because sometimes we feel unworthy, although God never sees us that way. The second, our love for one another, is called from us as a commandment, an obligation, a requirement of our belief in God in Christ. We must be constantly reminded of it as well. Freely given love doesn't come as easily for us as it does for God; and frankly, the fact that it's commanded of us can be a stumbling block. Let's admit it: we don't like being told what we must do. It's a lot easier to hear what we must *not* do. Just because Jesus says we are to love one another doesn't make it happen. It isn't automatic.

Those of you who have read the novel *Jane Eyre* remember the young man who has received the call to be a missionary in a foreign land. The catch is that he won't be able to go unless he takes a wife with him. So he approaches Jane, a governess, and tells her of his intent to take the Gospel to the heathen, asking her to accompany him as his wife. In response, Jane asks him to consider first whether or not they love each other. He responds that love has little to do with it. He says it's the spread of the Gospel that's important, that comes before everything else. Jane turns and walks away from him, saying "If there is no love for each other, for those who walk upon the earth together, then there can be no love of Christ."

We have some difficulty understanding God's love for us and how we are to share it with others because we don't understand it, not really. Our understanding of love is limited because we can know it only from our own context. We know how love affects us as human beings, how it makes us feel—when we are loved or when we love, when we are no longer loved or cease to love, when we desire love but do not feel loved.

In scripture, the meaning of love is ambiguous, because it's one word used to translate several *different* Greek words. Two of them, "eros" and "epithymia" are always focused on desire. "Agape" and "philia" don't designate desire, but are more platonic. The word "love" found in today's Gospel lesson is always translated from English to Greek as "agape," and then translated back to English as "charity." Think about charitable love. It isn't self-centered; it always focuses on the good of the other person rather than on the giver's good. It doesn't try to own or take advantage of the other. It's selfless, not dominating.

For Christians to understand love in this context, the best place to start is in the relationship of the three persons of the Trinity: Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer, or in the traditional words: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Interconnected, concerned about others but not possessive of them, nor inferior to them. St. Augustine, the fifth-century theologian who influences the church even today with his profound philosophies, used an analogy of love to help define the Trinity. Augustine says that God is the lover, the beloved, and the love that unites them.

As humans, we somehow expect love to be spontaneous, something that just happens. Instead, this structure of love grows from discipline, from the intentional practice of care and concern for others. It doesn't allow for time outs or start-overs for a bad day, it doesn't exclude someone we don't really like or someone who has hurt us or made us angry. Love like this requires focus so that it becomes interwoven into the fabric of our being, becoming our second nature, something that one

day we may find ourselves called to die for. Love like this is a rare thing indeed, and I'm pretty sure Jesus knew that when he commanded us to do it. That's probably *why* he commanded us to do it, not just once, but over and over again.

G. K. Chesterton once said, "Jesus told us to love our neighbors. In another place, he told us to love our enemies. This is because, generally speaking, they are the same people." Any of us who have been in relationship with other human beings understands just what Chesterton meant. It even applies to friends, a relationship to which Jesus speaks specifically in today's passage from John's Gospel. Aristotle describes three kinds of friendship. First are people who are our friends because we benefit from the relationship, people who serve a purpose in our life, perhaps allowing us to make a business connection or become part of a social group. In the second kind of friendship are people we consider friends simply because we enjoy their company, but with whom we share no deep roots. That friend might be a person we work with, for example, someone we go to lunch with but don't see otherwise and with whom we might lose connection if the context that unites us is no longer a part of our lives.

Our own application of the word friend has become even more general than what Aristotle stated. We use the term to describe someone we're barely acquainted with, and also someone we know just as well as we know ourselves. It might describe someone with whom we can sit quietly, without conversation, never feeling anxious, or someone with whom we can talk forever, a relationship that proves itself when we don't see each other for eons yet pick right up where we left off when we do meet again.

When we put "friend" alongside "love" in the context of someone for whom we would lay down our life, it changes everything. Friendship and love are both virtuous, but for most of us laying down our life for our friends might be taking the relationship a bit too far. That's because the term "friend" is almost as overworked and exaggerated as the term "love"—until we come to the third kind of friendship described by Aristotle. This is the best kind: friendship for the sake of friendship. True friends form each other in ethical principles and moral behavior, both good and bad. True friends support one another, hold each other accountable, say the hard things that need to be said. Aristotle likened a friend to another self. Jesus says that we are his friends if we do what he commands us. This is friendship that must be practiced, just as love is practiced, with intention and with care and concern. With focus, so that it becomes interwoven into the fabric of our being; becoming our second nature, so that one day we *can* imagine laying down our life for a friend.

We don't like to think of love as something that's commanded or expected of us. We want love to be free, no strings attached, and of course, that's just how God loves us. But alas, we aren't God! We have to work at being God-like, and few of us rarely achieve it. That doesn't mean we shouldn't try, it just means we have to think about it, be intentional about it, just as we do with any habit or characteristic that is not already a part of our human being.

At St. Francis, we pride ourselves on being friendly, and the time that is perhaps the most obvious is during the passing of "the Peace." In "the Peace," we're expressing our desire that God will give the gift of peace to those with whom we exchange the words, "May the peace of the Lord be always with you." Too often, I think, we expand it to include a kind of check-in with our friends; I do that myself more often than I'd like to admit because that isn't the purpose of our exchange. Today I ask that you use this time to share your love with each other in a way you don't normally do. Instead of saying "God's peace," or "the peace of the Lord," hold onto your neighbor's hand just one moment longer than usual, look them in the eye, then say—as if you really mean it—"May the Love of God be always with you." Say nothing more. Nothing more. Then turn to another neighbor and say it again. Let love be our focus as we celebrate the Eucharist together.

Jesus said to his disciples, "As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love." "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you." This isn't hard. It just takes a little practice. *Amen.*