

Sixth Sunday of Easter
May 17, 2009
John 15:9-17

When I was seven, I, like many kids my age, took piano lessons from a neighbor. I sat beside my teacher on the piano bench and tried my best to make music, or at least hit the right keys. One day, not many weeks into my lessons, my teacher asked me to sing the piece of music I was trying to bang out on the keys – I am sure she had a very good reason for doing so.

I am sure it was a tried and true pedagogical approach, motivated by many years of teaching.

My response to her request was to say very clearly – “I’m sorry but I am here to take piano lessons not singing lessons.”

I was told I was sassy. And that was the end of my piano lessons.

I don’t think I come to obedience naturally.

Neither did my brother or sister – we were three kids growing up in a household where our parents – a priest and a teacher - were seen by others as authority figures (by nature of their position in the community).

They were seen by their cheeky children as objects of ridicule, even when we were old enough to know better.

Thus, the first year my dad became a bishop he found his miter on top of the Christmas tree. And my sister, brother and I sat on the couch laughing about the passage in the bible that says bishops “must manage his own household well, keeping his children submissive and respectful in every way.”

I apologize to all parents on behalf of their kids if any of you also experience this behavior from your children.

But, again, I just don’t think I come to obedience naturally.

I have had to work on it, especially as I enter into a profession where I take a vow to obey not only my bishop, but any minister who has authority over me (including that minister off on sabbatical as we speak!)

So I have had to work on cultivating an understanding of obedience. And, taking some time to think about the nature and reward of Christian obedience is, I have come to find, a serious and life-giving discipline.

The starting point of which can be found in today’s readings:

The reading from first John says, “For the love of God is this, that we obey his commandments.”

And in the Gospel passage we hear Jesus say,

“If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love,” and

"This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you," and

"You are my friends if you do what I command you," and

"I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another."

This obedience, both *demonstrated* by the self emptying life of Christ and *demanding* of his followers, can only be enacted within a relationship based on love. And the love Christ speaks of is a love initiated and nourished by the divine love of the Trinity.

Writing about this Gospel passage one scholar says,

"For Christians, the true archetype of love is found within the inner life of God. According to Jesus' analogy, the disciples' relationship to one another should conform to their relationship to Jesus, which in turn finds its ultimate example in the Word's relationship to the Source. [Jesus' relationship to the Father]

The love among the persons of the trinity helps us to understand what wondrous love this truly is: concerned about others, not possessive or subordinating, thus allowing genuine space for the other to be; and superabundant, such that it can be offered without reserve.

One of the many analogies that Augustine offers for helping us understand the nature of the Trinity is that God is the lover, the beloved, and the love that unites them (David Cunningham, *Feasting on the Word*, p 498)."

In today's Gospel lesson, we are asked to obey – to keep the commandment of God to love one another as Christ has loved us.

We are given the context – abiding love,
the impulse – it is God's alone,
the support – friendship with God,
the mandate – to obey and to love,
the promise - to be truly free.

To collude with the divine in the counter cultural care necessary to sustain and nourish life on earth - this is to obey.

To know God has chosen you and to understand that being chosen brings both gift and obligation - this is to obey.

This is to be free.

When Jesus spoke these words to the disciples on the night before he was to die, he reminded them that "they were embraced by a divine purpose larger than their individual power of choice," says another scholar. "And for us living in a culture that celebrates self autonomy and choice," he continues, "these words may call us back to an awareness of *God's initiative* in seeking us out, gathering us into a community, and sending us into the world (Thomas Troeger, *Feasting on the Word*, p 501)."

God takes the initiative in seeking us out.

“You did not choose me but I chose you,” Jesus says. “And I appointed you to go and bear fruit.”

We have been chosen by God to be God’s friends. We have a choice *whether or not we want* to respond to that invitation. And we have a choice as to *how* we will respond.

God is seeking to be our friend.

How amazing is that!

Stop and think about that for a moment.

Think about the most powerful force in the world, the creator of the universe, wanting to be your friend – wanting to build you up, love you to death, raise you up, comfort, challenge and shape you, wanting to know, feel and transform your pain, wanting to accompany you in your loss, to hold you in your fear, to share with you in your joy – your complete joy – in victory, in love, and in peace.

Think about what it means, then, to love one another as God loves us. To be friends to one another. Real and true friends. To choose to be friends with someone and to hope for the return of the love you express.

This is what it is to love one another as God loves us.

I was reading a book this weekend in preparation for the adult formation class beginning here on Tuesday night. In this book on baptism the author speaks to what it means to be chosen by God.

“We are not chosen for special privilege and favor,” the author writes,

“We are not chosen to enjoy being together.

If we stopped here angry thunder would roll from that parted heaven; the dove would freeze in flight.

We are chosen *by God*, and we are chosen *for something*.

Like Jesus, we are chosen to serve and to die, with the promise that we will rise – again and again – and we are chosen to let all others know that they are chosen, too (Caroline Westerhoff, *Calling: A Song for the Baptized*, p 112).”

We all long to be chosen.

We all long to be known.

We all long to be called beloved.

Think back to elementary school. Think back to the time you were on the playground and the two students designated as captains started picking kids to be on their teams.

Ah the agony of not being chosen!!

The author of this book describes and expands on this nearly universal memory.

She writes,

“But the longing to be chosen does not depart with the passing of childhood. No, that longing grows more deeply intense in the run of time, when opportunities for being chosen seem fewer and fewer.

For it is in being chosen – by someone, for something – that we know we are important, worthy, that we matter.

And who among us does not want to matter to someone, for something? When we are chosen – by someone, for something – we are no longer alone (Westerhoff, p 111).”

This is what it is to love one another as God loves us, to choose to be in relationship with others as we have been chosen by God.

And this is the command God gives us.

The result of our obedience to this command is a perfect and true freedom, a freedom you can celebrate and a freedom you can rest within, knowing that God is well pleased with all you are and all you do.

I think the nature of this freedom can be understood through this simple story from an encounter with the great renaissance sculptor Michelangelo.

Once when he was found chipping at a block of marble, he was asked what he was carving.

He answered, “I am not carving anything; I am releasing the angel from the stone.”

Freedom is not the ability to carve whatever you want to carve, or do whatever it is you want to do, it is discovering through your living what God intends for your life and then claiming it, releasing love from stone.

“You did not choose me but I chose you,” Jesus says. “And I appointed you to go and bear fruit.”

Our obedience will draw us out of ourselves and into a pattern of life God intends: collusion with God’s impulse of love, God’s intention to make us friends, God’s will to build community.

For us, then, perfect freedom is “not a freedom of utterly indifferent and infinite choices, but a total freedom to choose the good (Mark McIntosh, *Christology from Within*, p 124).”

I never thought I came by obedience naturally. But I realize now that the impulse to obey is as natural as the love it shows, I only have to keep chipping away at it, believing in my own state of being chosen by God as friend.

Amen.