

There are two things that I was struck with in this passage from John's Gospel, the passage from John which has been appointed as our reading for today.

The first is this: And this is something I shared with you last week. We did not choose God, but God has chosen us. And we are God's own.

Let me repeat this – We did not choose God, but God chose us. And we are God's children! We are God's people.

And the second thing is this: And again, this is something I shared with you, last week. No matter what befalls us in this life, God is always ready to hold us, to care for us, and to be our friend. That is what God has promised for us.

But then, I need to ask myself a question, what does all this mean?

In today's gospel reading, Jesus shares with his followers and with us, that we need to abide in his love so that our joy will be fulfilled, and that we will remain connected to God. Remember what Jesus said in this week's gospel reading that ... Just shared with us? Jesus used the analogy of the grape vine, the grape vine with its branches, its fruit, and its tendency to grow and spread. The vine growing and spreading is the essence of Jesus' story. And then there is the stories of the sheep and the sheep fold. We have heard these stories in the gospels presented by the other gospel writers such as Luke and Matthew and Mark. The grape vine and the sheep are examples of how we are to remain connected to God, our Creator. And how we are to abide in His love for everyone of us.

If, we abide in God's love, and share God's love with all Creation, then we will know the same joy which Jesus told his disciples they would find in him.

The metaphor of the vine and the branches, Jesus used to teach his disciples, and was meant to teach them that joy can even be found in the midst of trouble. Joy is not meant to replace or take away the suffering we endure. Living life in our time will never be free from things which may trouble us. Nor is our joy in Christ meant to take us out of our existence in this world. Joy, in the midst of daily life, in the reality of this troubled world, gives us a glimpse of the eternal relationship that God has promised to us. It is a relationship which will

never be severed. It is a relationship with our Creator which will never end should we chose to accept God's gift of grace in our lives. That is God's promise to us.

Now, let's face reality here. Every day, we experience the dichotomy between the sorrow and suffering of being human, and the joy of knowing that we are God's own. Remember what I started this sermon with; God has chosen us, we have not chosen God?

We are to act toward others as friends, just as Jesus Christ, our Risen Saviour does toward us. So, what does it mean to be a friend with someone? Well, it can mean many things.

It can mean that I care for your well-being. I want others to think well of you, and I desire that no harm comes to you, because you are my friend.

It means I will be there to share your suffering because our friendship is often forged in the depths of common suffering, disaster, or in our shared experience in life. It also means that I desire only the best for you. Our friendship is sustained because we both are invested in keeping up our end of the bargain, our friendship. I am willing to share what I have with you, be it my material possessions, resources, or even my inner-most thoughts and fears. And it is my hope that you feel the same towards me. True friendship knows no bounds. Jesus proved that.

Jesus knew what true friendship meant. In the farewell discourse, during the last supper, Jesus laid out for his disciples what he knew would be his final act of friendship for them – to give up his own life so that they might come into the eternal joy of God's love for all creation. This what Jesus' friendship looked like for them and it also looks the same for us – it is deeply relational in its being and at the same time inter-relationally dependent on how we act toward each other. Wait a minute, isn't that what community is all about? Isn't that what being part of God's people is all about?

Abiding in God's love is powerful and freeing. We are God's people living in the world and we do not live our lives in isolation. We abide in God's love by living

in community, in supporting each other, and in stewardship of all God's gifts of Creation.

The gospel passage we heard read today is the second time in John's gospel that we have this message of love. The writer of the Gospel attributed to John must have felt this message about God's love was important enough to repeat it twice. Love is a lesson which bears repeating and the gospel writer has chosen to repeat it wisely, just as Jesus himself repeated this teaching about having love for each other, again and again.

Today, many of us hold a different idea of what it means to love someone and to hold that person as a friend. When I was researching this topic, I came across some statistics regarding how people view friendship as we approach the halfway point in this twenty-fourth year of this twenty-first century after the birth of Jesus Christ. Did you know that most men over the age of thirty were not able to name one person whom they believed was their close friend? They did not feel that they had any close friends. Most men have acquaintances and very few close friends. Now, women, on the other hand, indicated on average that they had five to six friends in their lives. You see, statistically, most of us will admit to having casual friendships with others, but very few of us would be willing to admit that we would die for someone, especially someone beyond our immediate family. But Jesus did just that too. He died for all of us.

Life for us right now seems to be somewhat unstable, what with the high cost of living, global conflict, and the ever-present threat of a resurgence of whatever the next pathogen might be. If we are to abide by Jesus' teaching about loving God and loving our neighbours, we need to be responsible for our own well-being and not place the safety of ourselves, our families, or any of those we contact in jeopardy, by acting contrary to the public good. This will have implications for every facet of our lives and everyone around us. We need to care for each other, as Jesus did and does, even today.

God loves us all, no matter who we are, what we believe in, what we hold dear, or how we react to what has been made known to us for the common good of us all.

We may not like all that is being said and done around us. Yet, we are to be guided by the words Jesus gave to his followers – abide in me, as I abide in you. God’s love is what will make the difference. If we love as Jesus has loved us, if we see the world through God’s eyes, we will see past the things that separate us from each other. We will recognize the image of God in the faces of every human being because we are all God’s children.

In these troubled times, we are being called to bear fruit, fruit that will last. Our lives have been changed because of God’s love for us. Remember what I said earlier – God chose us, we did not choose God. It is the love of God that drives us to call each other friend. It is the love of God that has allowed us to be called friend by our Saviour, Jesus Christ. And it is the love of God that gives us the strength to face tomorrow. For this, we should be truly thankful.

Amen.