

Easter VI Year B 2012

“No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.”

When our son James was about a year old Katharine and I would stroll him most every late afternoon up our street. He was one of those highly verbal children who had something to say about everything. Even after a year old he could speak in sentences, always paying rapt attention to what was going on around him, and offering some commentary.

Around this same time my youngest brother Bob had come home from school and had gone to work for a local construction company. Bob and James had a special bond....Bob, the ever earthy outdoorsman would tell James marvelous stories of the woods....the magnificent, mysterious and sometimes dangerous creatures that lived in them...James listening unblinking.... Bob told him about catching fish with painted sails on their backs....of fish that could fly....of storms at sea, of midnight lightning... Bob hung out with us a lot then....he would first thing upon walking in our door grab James and hold him up over his head and James would gasp and giggle and Bob would let him drool all over his face.

One late afternoon Bob joined us on our stroll up the street...as we turned the corner at the top of the hill we looked toward the carport of the house next to the house on the corner and saw a woman lying face down on the concrete, her huge German Shepherd lying next to her....without hesitation Bob ran as fast as he could to the woman in spite of the German Shepherd’s hair raising suspicion.... He turned the woman over literally lying down beside her and began trying to revive her...breathing into her mouth to mouth....pressing on her chest....she was dead....Bob broke the news to her husband just inside the screen door of the house, watching television at high volume, unaware of what had befallen. The old man wailed. James was watching unblinking but unusually mute.

Over the years I have wondered what that child saw that day, what that child thought upon seeing his beloved uncle respond so courageously (what could a one year old know after all?)... What I saw was a cardinal act of love, instinctive, courageous....I saw one laying down his life for the life of another....we all saw it...and seeing, at least for me, is believing.

That was thirty years ago....and just this past Christmas James’ wife Corey bore them a daughter....the delivery was trying as deliveries are, an all night ordeal...and then weeks later Corey became ill with a dangerous auto immune disorder which rendered her tired and weak....thankfully she is better now, and getting better....but I have observed James over these

several months attending to her every need, with a certain resigned joy despite having to work late most every night...I've watched him love her with all he's got....laying down his life...perhaps somewhere in the recesses of his soul is the profound memory of an act of love to which he was witness, an act of love so graciously given on a little street with a row of houses in Southeast Alabama so long ago.

I don't have to tell you about the challenge of being family...and perhaps our families...our kin....are the laboratories within which we learn and practice the art of love....to sacrifice, to forgive, to forebear....It's hard and unruly work to be sure....and ultimately we learn that we lay down our lives for each other....and don't get me wrong...I'm not talking about codependence...I'm talking about bearing life to each other....and that among us that doesn't bear life we are duty bound in love to challenge...and that too is laying down one's life....What our God wants for us is life....not just being alive....but life in all its fullness; and the way of Jesus is the way of life in its fullness....And the word from John's Gospel today is that as Jesus laid down his life for the commonweal of God, for God's way upon earth....then we as friends of God, bearing the same legacy as the Christ, being sent as he is sent...we too must lay down our lives for our world that lies dead or dying....because in Christ we have been given an extended family....that includes not only those of us who show up here at this place, but we are given to a broken world in need of God's life giving breath....We are asked to give all we've got...our very lives....It is in laying down our lives that the fullness of life God dreams for the world comes to fruition.... and Jesus informs us that in such a vocation there is great joy....but know that such a life takes courage....singleness of heart....whole-heartedness.... courage whose root means heart....to lay down one's life takes heart....and we've got it in us, sisters and brothers, being made in the image of God... laying down our lives for the greater good is what we are born for....It is the very Incarnation.

I'm not sure we believe that in our culture, because the powers and principalities of our world would teach us otherwise....powers and principalities which are the structures of our world that sap life instead of engendering it; they exist solely for themselves...self interest the tell tale sign thereof....Jesus calls these powers and principalities the "world", which we'll read about in next week's gospel....we find these self serving structures in Government, in Education, in Corporations, in our myriad institutions, even in the church, even in our families...and the means to thwart their power, we are taught in this gospel, is to lay down our lives for

our friends, even the stranger claimed as friend.... For all who are given to us seeking life....for all who languish for lack of God's life giving breath.

The reason we gather here Sunday after Sunday is to give thanks for the fullness of life we have been given (and of course a full life is never without crises and problems, but a life of purpose and meaning); and we gather to celebrate being loved unconditionally by God, without condition, that's another thing our culture refuses to believe; and we gather to be nurtured as friends of God at God's table to be empowered for leaving this place so that we may lay down our lives as Christ laid down his.....

We've talked earlier about the Greek philosophical categories used in this Gospel...Logos, the Word, being one.... Jesus the word, the connection between heaven and earth, between God and humankind...but another is friend...friendship in the Greek philosophical academy, means one for whom one would lay down one's life....there is nothing any nobler in ancient Greek culture than friendship....so Jesus is calling his disciples friends...peers...brothers, sisters...family...all of us born of the same light, all of us, God and humankind, same substance....we are called to act as God acts.... to befriend others...raising all to the high dignity of friend...befriending, the noblest of vocations.

We send from our midst today six high school seniors who for all practical purposes are leaving home for good and entering a complicated world, a world of great beauty and of great pain, a world magnificent, mysterious, and dangerous....Know dear ones that you are sent out to lay down your lives, that's why you were born, born to be world changers, we affirmed that at your Baptisms....so my prayer for you is for courage, for you will need it.... You are sent to give all that you've got for the good of the world in which you live....beware of the powers and principalities that bring death...live for the good of your friends whom you don't even know yet...live always for the good of the whole....so others might see....and others might learn, what it means to lay down one's life...live so that others might see and learn what the art of love looks like in the flesh....that they may see and learn and become world changers like you....because seeing is believing.