

**6 Easter – Year B – May 20, 2009 - Homily**  
**Acts 10:44-48; Psalm 98; 1 John 5:1-6; John 15:9-17**  
**Susan E. Wilmot**

Writing in her book, *The Almost Daily eMos*, Barbara Cawthorne Crafton, talks about how she met Archbishop Desmond Tutu, and how Tutu calls himself a one-sermon preacher. “His one sermon is that God loves us.” There have been absolutely masses of books and articles written about love, along with countless songs and movies. Since I looked at the readings for this week, I’ve been humming the famous Beatles’ tune, *All you need is love*, pretty much every day. The word ‘love’ or one of its derivatives appears an astonishing nine times in this short, nine-verse passage from the Gospel of John. Perhaps just as surprising is that the word ‘commandment’ or its derivative also figures prominently – no less than five times -- in this passage about love. The connection is not a coincidence.

It is true that the whole of creation, including humankind, was made out of Love; the super-abundant, overflowing love of God that is the perfect and complete community of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. It is also true that God loves each and every one of us unconditionally. God’s Son, Jesus, died for the sins of the whole world. All who accept God’s gift of faith and confess Jesus as Lord, know the power of God’s forgiveness and healing in their lives. Yet there are many who continue to refuse God. In doing so, they fail to accept the gift of faith and forgiveness for sins. They shun God for a life of continued rebellion, reveling in self-centered, independent chaos, instead of worshipping God in joy-filled and loving relationship. God will never force anyone to accept His gracious gift. It doesn’t change the fact that Jesus died for the life of the whole world, and lives again as our hope in new and unending life in Him. However, there’s no doubt that faithfully accepting the gift of salvation by God’s grace radically affects our relationship with God. We are no longer among the crowd that is the whole human race, stained and marked by the dirty brush of humanity’s inherent sinfulness. As Christ’s faithful disciples and lovers of God, we are clothed in righteousness. In God’s eyes, we now stand apart from the crowd, covered by Christ’s goodness, and shining with the light of love. All that to say that our salvation is assured if the most we ever do is simply say “yes” to God in Christ Jesus, our Lord.

So what then of the apparent connection between God’s love and God’s commandments as the Gospel implies? It is also a fact that once you and I have accepted Jesus as our Lord and Savior, we are irrevocably changed by the indwelling love that is the Holy Spirit. Our lives have undergone a revolutionary regime change! Perhaps one of the few revolutions in this world that is positive in nature! We have effectively transferred rule over our hearts to Jesus, and Jesus is alive. One of the greatest truths about all *living* beings is constant and inevitable change. “Yes” is just a first response, not our last. The faith in each of us that says “yes” to Jesus and to the spiritual revolution continues to prompt you and me to grow in God. Growing in God is, among other things getting to know God and His Son through prayer, studying the Scriptures, gathering with other Christians for worship and fellowship, and learning to become friends of Jesus. In other words, we are not freeze-frame Christians caught in a photograph, stuck in the same place and time for eternity. We are living members of Christ’s Body, responding to God’s gift with love and gratitude. The more realize how much God loves us, and what Jesus has done for us, the more we desire to do God’s will. For Jesus this came naturally – even to the point of His complete trust in God as he consented to death on a cross for the sake of the world. For you and me, it is more of a lifetime process of surrendering self and our own desires, in order to align our will with God’s will. There is something in our humanness that doesn’t like giving up any of our independence, even when we know that it gets us into all kinds of trouble.

Becoming and being a friend of Jesus is also more complex than it might sound. We know from our own life experiences that making friends is not an instantaneous thing. We get to know one another over a period of time. Our conversations and sharing build trust. Trust gives us confidence in the relationship and so we become even more open. In our relationship with the Lord, we have even greater confidence because of Jesus’ steadfast love and faithfulness. Jesus calls His disciples friends, because

they are no longer servants. The general rule of servitude is unquestioning obedience to the master or mistress' commands, usually under threat of consequence for disobedience. On the contrary, in friendship, there is no fear of punishment to compel obedience; there is just love and a desire to put the needs of the other before self. This is precisely what Jesus did in laying down His life for us. The Word of God never lies, and so we can be absolutely certain that when Jesus commands us to love one another, and love God there is no ulterior motive, only God's perfect desire for our health and welfare, and transformation into all goodness. In the Gospel, Jesus describes this as making His joy complete in you and me. In the words of Dame Julian of Norwich, from her fourteenth century writings called *Revelations of Divine Love*, "to see and love its maker" is what makes the "soul to seem small in its own sight... and fills it with reverence and humility, and with generous love to [others]." She goes on to say, "The seeking, with faith, hope and love, pleases our Lord, and the finding pleases the soul and fills it with joy."

Friendship is a relationship marked by mutuality and respect. To be a good friend to Jesus we stay in touch through prayer, we come together regularly in worship. We also continue to explore and learn about Jesus in Scripture, and in other people. Remember that we are all made in God's image, and we have promised to seek the face of Christ in all those we meet. True friendship with Jesus is also about serving Christ in others, and putting the needs of others ahead of our own. Our joy in the friendship of the Lord is a continuous creative act, showing the world what real love is. Desmond Tutu says that, "If we really understood how much God loves us, we'd all genuflect before one another in awe." Tutu is not talking about worshipping others, or putting people on a pedestal – that would be idolatry. But he is talking about seeking and honoring the face of Christ in all people with the same unconditional love that Jesus has for us. For my part, I believe that loving God brings us such joy and a constant yearning to know Jesus better that we desire to make friends with more and more of our neighbors. Then in the same loving friendship exemplified by Christ, you and I bend our hearts to the needs of one another in awe of God's love and majesty, to the glory of His Name.

Amen.