

Northwestern College Chapel

22 January 2007

Hear the Word of God from St. John's Gospel, Chapter 15, vv. 12 through 17:

This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.

*The Word of the Lord*

*May the words of my mouth*

*And the meditations of our hearts*

*Be acceptable in your sight, O God,*

*Our Strength and our Redeemer. Amen.*

Before last year's *The Nativity Story*, before Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*, there was Monty Python's classic film *The Life of Brian*. One of the movie's well known scenes occurs on the fringes of a multitude to which Jesus is speaking, delivering the Beatitudes. The people there on the edges of the crowd can't quite make out what he's saying. One of them exclaims, "*Blessed are the cheese makers?!*" He's surprised and

puzzled at what he has misheard, but a guy standing nearby—probably a professor—starts to explain, pompously pointing out that of course Jesus doesn't mean only cheese makers, but all producers of dairy products. Later we see them trying to figure out why the *Greek* will inherit the Earth. This reminds us that we don't always clearly hear what Jesus is telling us, and that we can replace something that's hard to hear with something different, something that seems to make sense even when in reality it's completely off base.

Those words from John are a fragment of Jesus' long farewell to his disciples at the Last Supper. The scene begins with Jesus washing their feet and it ends, several chapters later, with Jesus and the disciples setting out for the place where Jesus will be arrested. Jesus knows his death is drawing near. He speaks with urgency, repeating a few crucial things many times; things he's anxious to make stick in the minds of his disciples who, even at this late date, are inattentive and obtuse. There were many things Jesus might have tried to impress upon his disciples in this dark hour, many commands he might have given them. But the one thing he needed to say was: *Love one another*.

Jesus was speaking to his disciples, to the community of faith, to what becomes his Church, and thus to us. Someone might think that within the Church, where everyone is good and lovable, it's reasonable to expect us to love each other. But we all know how far *that* is from the truth. When it comes to religion, matters that seem of ultimate significance are at issue, the convictions and commitments in terms of which we define ourselves in relation to God. Here often there is the least love lost, and we are most ready to reject and exclude. Consider those 'hot button' issues that divide and threaten to break

the Church. Issues where, whichever side you're on, it's unpleasant even to hear the other side spoken for. I confess that I find it very difficult not to regard those who disagree with me on some of these matters as betraying the Gospel, as taking a stand *obviously* at odds with everything we are supposed to be about as followers of Jesus. I want to banish those who are so wrong, so I don't have to hear this stuff. At the same time I know that those on the other side of the issues feel the same way about me, and some of the things I think. Specific controversies come and go, but one way or another the Church of Jesus has almost always found itself in this situation. The command Jesus repeatedly gave on the eve of his humiliation and death is contrary to all our inclinations. The temptation is to take the Church away from Jesus and make it into a kind of club, where membership depends on having the right beliefs and doing the right things. But of course it's not a club; it's like your family: you're stuck, for better or worse, with people who might believe and do all kinds of bad and crazy things, people you might never in a million years have chosen to cast your lot with. Yet these are the people Jesus calls us to love, to put up with, to be with, even in painful disagreement.

Jesus commands the disciples to love one another the way he has loved them. He has loved them despite all the utterly wrong beliefs they have about him. His commitment to being with them is stronger than anything they can do to misunderstand, frustrate, abandon, deny, and betray him. *That's* the way Jesus says *we* have to love one another. And let me tell you, I don't much like it. I want to be with people who are like me, reasonable people who believe and do what's right.

If we obey this command, it will only be because God somehow makes possible what is not possible for us. Jesus gives one clear indication of what it means to love one another: No one has greater love than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends. There can be no doubt about whose death Jesus refers to here, though there have been times when his disciples have embodied his love even at this extreme. Several years ago, in Rwanda, during the tribal genocide, when 13,000 Christians—Anglicans, Roman Catholics, Pentecostals, Baptists, and so on—were ordered to separate themselves according to their tribes, into the Hutus and the Tutsis, so some among them could be taken out and murdered. As a body, they refused to do so, shouting "*We are one in Christ! We are one in Christ!*" So they were all machine gunned and died together.

Those African Christians disagreed on all kinds of things, some of them probably of real importance. Yet they put aside what they valued for the sake of one another, for the sake of Jesus. It's hard to die for one another; but it's also hard to live with one another. But Jesus demands that we set aside what we think is important for the sake of someone else; counting things we care about deeply as of less importance than that other person for whom Jesus died. What we feel we need to make absolute, Jesus insists we treat as relative, for the sake of one another—for his sake. This offends against human nature. It's against our better judgment. We long to be right, to be in the right, and to judge and condemn and send packing the other guy who is in the wrong. We want to stand up for what's right, to stick to our principles. Most of us in our hearts suspect that you're not really serious about your beliefs, that you're not really committed, unless you're ready to take a stand, to draw a line. But contrast St. Paul, who told the Church at Corinth, "*For the sake of the gospel I will be all things to all men*" (1 Corinthians. 9.22). No man of

principle there. What mattered supremely to him was the love of God revealed in Jesus and making that love known to other people. To the same Corinthians, people who thought they were wiser and more spiritual than Paul, he wrote, “*When I came to you...I did not come proclaiming the testimony of God to you in lofty words or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified*” (1 Corinthians 2.1-2). We have to be prepared to sacrifice everything else, not because it’s necessarily unimportant—sometimes matters of real importance are at stake—but because it’s not the good news of God’s love for the world made flesh in Jesus.

In the first epistle of John (4.19) we read that we are able to love because the God who was in Christ first loved us. God’s love was made flesh in Jesus, who gave himself for us. The meaning of the Cross of Christ is that God crucified judgment and condemnation; he put to death once and for all the comprehensible comforting principles of fairness and justice; he disarmed the power of the law not because these things were of no value, but because of his love for us. That love declares us his beloved people in Christ, his sons and daughters, his friends. Whatever we do that pleases God, including our loving God and one another, can be only a grateful response to his unstinting love.

Margery Williams’ story, *The Velveteen Rabbit*, is one of the great works of theology. As you probably recall, it’s about how a toy, stuffed rabbit is made into a real rabbit by the power of his owner’s love. Another inhabitant of the nursery, the Skin Horse, explains this to him:

*“What is REAL ?” asked the rabbit one day... “Does it mean having things that buzz inside you and a stick-out handle?”*

*“Real isn’t how you are made, said the Skin Horse. “It’s a thing that happens to you. When a child loves you for a long, long time, not just to play with but REALLY loves you, then you become real.”*

*“Does it hurt?” asked the rabbit.*

*“Sometimes,” said the Skin Horse, for he was always truthful. “When you are REAL you don’t mind being hurt.*

*“Does it happen all at once, like being wound up, or bit by bit?”*

*“It doesn’t happen all at once, said the Skin Horse. “You become. It takes a long time. That’s why it doesn’t happen to people who break easily, or have sharp edges, or who have to be carefully kept. Generally, by the time you are Real, most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out and you get loose in the joints and very shabby. But these things don’t matter at all, because once you are real you can’t be ugly, except to people who don’t understand.”*

*“I suppose you are REAL, said the Rabbit. And then he wished he had not said it, for he thought the Skin Horse might be sensitive.*

*“The Boy’s Uncle made me REAL,” he said. “That was many years ago; but once you are REAL you can’t become unreal again; it lasts for always.”*

The Velveteen Rabbit longed to be a real, flesh and blood rabbit. Yet there was not a thing he could do to make it happen. Only the boy’s love has the power to make him real. All he could do was trust the boy and gratefully love him back, in whatever limited and imperfect way he could, not yet being real. It’s the same with us. For the sake of Jesus crucified, resurrected and ascended God refuses to relate to us in terms of judgment, condemnation, and exclusion. For human wisdom, this makes about as much sense as *“Blessed are the cheese makers.”* What comes naturally is the denial of love, the readiness to sacrifice others so we can feel pure, secure in being right. None of us can very deeply feel that God accepts us, no strings attached. None of us can very deeply grasp the absurdity of accepting God’s madly gratuitous love for us while damning one

another. It's only as we grow into knowing ourselves—and all others—as fully accepted by God for the sake of Jesus that we begin to be reshaped by God's love.

Our faith in Jesus Christ is confidence in the power of his self-giving love despite all appearances to the contrary. Not because we're sentimental or believe in the power of positive thinking; not because universal love would be a great idea if only everyone would live by it, but because God, the sovereign Creator and Ruler of the universe, shows us who he is in the life and death of Jesus. That God aims to remake us into a people that love one another as he loves us, and we can be sure that whatever the current paltry state of affairs with respect to our love for one another, God is at work to change us. So let's get real. Sometimes it hurts. But we will be drawn into to love and joy that is the everlasting life of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Thanks be to God!

*Go as blessed peacemakers to love and serve the Lord! Amen.*