

Sixth Weekend of Easter (B/RCL): "Xenophilia"  
John 15:9-17  
May 5-6, 2018  
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

The news feed headline on my phone caught my eye. It was something like: "J.K. Rowling Apologizes for Killing Off Harry Potter Character." "Who'd she kill off?" I thought. Sirius, Dumbledore, Professors Snape and Lupin, Fred Weasley, all already made their exit. Has she written another book? Then I heard a clip of her voice on the radio, "reminding" us of something I never really knew. Last Thursday, May 3<sup>rd</sup>, was the anniversary of the death of Dobby the house elf. The author tweeted:

"It's that anniversary again... This year, I apologize for killing someone who didn't die during the Battle of Hogwarts, but who laid down his life to save the people who'd win it. I refer, of course, to Dobby the house elf."<sup>1</sup>

I heard that and thought, "That's from our Gospel for this coming weekend!"

*"No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends."*

That verse, John 15:13, has been on my mind and heart over these last couple months, during the funerals of 4 long-time firemen: George Minier, Bill Leach, Michael Johnston, and just last weekend, Ginger Salles' dad, Bucky Brand. Bucky was a fireman in Long Branch for nearly 50 years, and a long line of his fellow firefighters stood at attention in the back of the room during the funeral home service. More than one of them nodded as I quoted our Lord: "... no greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends," and as I pointed out that Bucky's firefighting was a great example of obedience to our Lord's command and willingness to lay down one's life not just for one's friends –but for **strangers** – an even rarer and holier form of love.

There was a heartwarming article in the paper last Monday about acts of love not **during** but **following** fire: "After Prairie Fires, Strangers Send Help in Bales."<sup>2</sup> With all the other news flying around us, there hasn't been much national press about wildfires ravaging prairie and pastureland in Oklahoma. 350,000 acres of grass and other vegetation have been blackened. Ranchers were facing the grim prospect of selling off entire herds of cattle before they died of starvation, with nothing left to graze. That is, until pick-up trucks and semis filled with bales of hay started to arrive, before the last of the flames were even extinguished. The help came from other parts of Oklahoma and beyond: Kansas, Texas, Michigan, Montana. Some of the aid came from ranchers who had received a similar gift of hay after their pastureland burnt. Some came from those who simply understood the crisis and cared enough to meet the need in whatever way they could. They weren't laying down their lives but they were sacrificing some of their own livelihood to sustain that of others. **Love of the stranger:** xenophilia. It's the opposite of xenophobia -- **fear** or **hatred** of the stranger that we see and hear so much about these days.

Before Mr. Brand's funeral service last Sunday, I was talking to a friend of the family who is a Korean War veteran. He talked about being on duty at the DMZ in frost-bite-threatening temperatures. He was in charge of a group of sentries on night duty. They were positioned prone on the freezing ground. Every 20 minutes he'd have to crawl down the line through near-but-not-quite frozen water to be sure the guys were awake. Then he'd crawl back to his original position, soaked to the skin, set his alarm for another 20 minutes, and cry. Pastor Mark, a retired military chaplain, has told me that men and women join the armed services for love of country, but they do what they do in the heat of battle, in the midst of wartime, for the guy or gal next to them. Much heroism and self-sacrifice is rooted in **friendship:**

*“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.”*

On Saturday evening I end the Eucharistic prayer with the words, “We ask this through Jesus Christ, our Savior and our friend.” I hesitate a little inside as I say that, wondering, “Is **‘friend’** a little **too familiar**, talking about our **Lord?**” But St. John reminds us that Jesus calls **us** friends.... And that’s a reciprocal relationship. If **we** are friends, I am **your** friend and you are **mine**; the door swings both ways. It’s an intimate thing, being a friend. We count on each other to be there. To see each other in the best light possible. To share the load. To multiply joys and divide sorrows. To exert tough love and to tell the truth in love, even when it is painful.

Jesus chooses **us** as His friends and counts on us:

*“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.”* (John 15:16-17)

What a difference to serve as a friend rather than as a slave or resentful indentured servant or disgruntled employee! We joyfully serve with the dignity of the children of God, as sons and daughters of the Most High, as friends of the One who loved us so much He laid down His life for us. We serve with the strength that flows from our deep union with our Lord, who invites us into intimate communion, “...abide in my love.” Abide: stay close to Me. Close enough that I can whisper in your ear and you’ll hear. Close enough that if you stumble I can catch you. So close it’s like I’m the vine and you’re the branch; My sap runs through your veins! Abide, stay as close to Me as butter to bread, as body to breath, as mother to child, as lover to lover: “[B]ecause apart from me you can do nothing.” (John 15:5c)

This “abide in me” isn’t a finger-wagging commandment: “Thou shalt! Or else!” This is the sweetest, most important invitation ever. We’ve been chosen. How will we respond? There’s no better spiritual proximity to God than physical proximity to the Word, the altar, the Sacrament, the community of faith. Even in the summer ☺. Who do you love the most, in all the world? Given a choice, would you take a three month vacation from that person? Would you choose absence rather than presence? Worship this summer. Not as a “Thou shalt! Or else!” But as a loving RSVP of “Yes” to the One who loves you well.

Not that we always get it right. God knows. Literally. I love this thought:

And often though we fail him, to that he holds: “I chose you; and knowing all there is to know, the very worst, I choose you still.”

He chooses us to channel God’s saving, healing love into this world, into people’s lives, into every space we visit, every situation we encounter. Unlike Harry Potter, we don’t have a magic wand to wave – but even better we have the gifts of the Holy Spirit: faithful presence, loving labor, Good News to share about our Savior, material and spiritual gifts to give our neighbor. At each funeral these days I wonder, “What legacy of love am I creating?” “How closely am I ‘abiding?’” “Am I loving in deeds or only in words?” The Lord’s answer? “I chose you; and knowing all there is to know, the very worst, I choose you still.” Amen

<sup>1</sup>El Hunt, *J.K. Rowling is sorry for killing Dobby the house elf* (on-line NM), May 3, 2018.

<sup>2</sup>Mitch Smith, “After Prairie Fires, Strangers Send Help in Bales.” (*NY Times*, April 30, 2018), p. A10.

<sup>3</sup>*The Interpreter’s Bible* (Vol. 8, Nashville: Abingdon, 1952), p. 724.