

What Wondrous Love is This
 Anna Pinckney Straight
 Old Stone Presbyterian Church ~ Lewisburg, West Virginia
 May 6, 2018

1 John 5:1-6

1Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God, and everyone who loves the parent loves the child. 2By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and obey his commandments. 3For the love of God is this, that we obey his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome, 4for whatever is born of God conquers the world. And this is the victory that conquers the world, our faith. 5Who is it that conquers the world but the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?

6This is the one who came by water and blood, Jesus Christ, not with the water only but with the water and the blood. And the Spirit is the one that testifies, for the Spirit is the truth.

John 15:9-17

9As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. 10If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. 11I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.

12"This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. 13No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. 14You are my friends if you do what I command you. 15I 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. 16You 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. 17I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another."

What wondrous love is this? What wondrous love is this.

Jesus is talking to the disciples about love, and for most of us, we think about family, children the family of birth or the family we choose. Spouse. Significant other.

And love can include those things. They certainly aren't excluded by love.

But Jesus is going for a different slant here. A different angle.

Here, Jesus is talking about the ways in which we love one another in the faithful community. The ways in which we love our friends.

The word for friend in this passage is from the verb "to love."

Friends, therefore, are those who are loved¹

And friends who are true to that relationship are modeled after Jesus' love.

A love that is honest.

A love that is kind.

A love that wants the true fulfillment of God's possibilities in the other person.²

So much more and so different from being nice. Or polite.

And why? In order for joy to be complete.

Complete joy—more than pleasure. More than happiness.

In friendship, in love, there is faithfulness, a living out of and into God's great kingdom.

Not the stuff of fairy tales, but the good stuff of real life.

Relationships where there is not just love, but honesty and engagement.

What wondrous love is this?

The kind of love that my friend Julie described Julie³, a colleague of mine, wrote this week about sharing a piece of writing with a friend of hers. It was important writing, job writing, with much riding on it. Julie sent it to her friend to proofread.

The e-mail from her friend arrived Tuesday morning. It was short, brief, and to the point: *"Oh. This is not good. Not good at all. Scrap it. Start over. Did you think this was good???"*

The words hit hard. Not that Julie had expected to win the Pulitzer with her writing, but she had thought that it would be good enough, and to find out that it was **not** good enough hurt. It hurt a lot. And it hounded her all day. Yet. Even while it hounded her, side by side with her disappointment all day was a deep thanksgiving. Thanksgiving for just how fortunate she was to have such a friend. A friend who loves her. And a friend who will not let her make a fool of herself.

Honest friendship. Telling you when you have spinach in your teeth, and even more importantly, also being able to tell you when you have clutter in your heart.

Martin Marty writes:

¹ Leander E. Keck, New Testament Editor, *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. IX, "John" by Gail R. O'Day, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), page 758.

² "The English noun 'friend' does not fully convey the presence of love that undergirds the Johannine notion of friendship in v. 13, but to an understanding of friendship wholly grounded in Jesus' particular love. A comparison of 14:15 and 31 with 15:14 suggests that to be Jesus' friend and to love Jesus are synonymous, because both are defined as keeping Jesus' commandments."²

³ Shared with Julie's permission...

One concern about using the word *friendship* in relations to God is that we might sentimentalize our understanding. Friends are supposed to overlook flaws in each other and live with them. Friendship implies affection, and affection can sometimes be saccharin. But in practice, long, intimate and tested friendships are not always soft and concessive. A true friend is one who can risk saying to the other, “Get off your high horse!” or “This time you went too far!”...Such chiding words can hurt, but they are part of the healing and growth that belongs to friendship.⁴

Honesty in relationship like this is not something that can be thrown around lightly. It takes courage to offer and humility to receive. It is an action which is as far away as possible from the desire to be right or fix a problem, but is, instead, based in and born of love of for another. Of wanting the light of God to shine clearly in another. Such honesty is usually not to be offered unless asked for. It means overcoming the fear of being exposed as a fraud, of having human frailties and flaws.

And sometimes it is counter intuitive.

In my own life, I’ve had to love someone by telling them I could no longer answer the phone when they called at 2 AM, until they were talking to someone about their addiction issues, because as long as they were pouring their soul out to me they weren’t pouring it out to the person who could actually help them get better.

It’s also meant learning to accept it say thank you when friends have helped me. Which, for me, is harder than scheduling a root canal.

It’s someone who will drop everything they are doing to go and sit with you, and who will love you while you have a long overdue emotional meltdown.

Again, not somebody who wants to fix you, but someone who knows the light of God that shines from within you.

What wondrous love is this, includes accountability. One group of feminist and womanist theologians who gathered to do this difficult work of honest friendship wrote, once it was all over, that “Often a candor is born between friends who already share a bond of assurance that speaking the truth of one’s life will not be futile.”⁵

Showing, amongst themselves, the kind of love Jesus showed his disciples.

Jesus, who was abundantly honest. Calling out a faithless generation (Matthew 17).

Comparing his best friend, Peter, to Satan (Mark 8).

⁴ Martin Marty, “F is for Friendship.” *The Christian Century*, February 24, 2009, page 24.

⁵ Mud Flower Collective, *God’s Fierce Whimsy: Christian Feminism and Theological Education*. Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 1985. Page 35.

Peter who would go on to be the rock on which the church is founded.

Friends.

When Jesus sat at a table with those who would abandon them, one who would betray him, and didn't walk away, but blessed bread, broke it, and gave it to them.

What wondrous love is this.

That's what Jesus envisioned for the faith community. A family of something more than birth. More than choice. Of baptism.

Because when you are, when we are, going to wade into the deep waters of the world, you need a hand to hold onto that you can absolutely trust will be there. Without question.

Friendship, a gift not of our own creation, it is a gift from God, first modeled by God. The one who knows our flaws and our sins. The one who gave us the gift of life and calls us to speak the truth of our lives. The one who calls it like it is, and loves us anyway, sees the faith within us. God is many things. God is also our friend.

And we are reminded to give thanks for the friendships that are modeled after Jesus' words, and accept the call to cultivate more of them, so that those to whom love is a stranger, and even those to whom love is an acquaintance, will find in us generous friends.

What Wondrous Love is This.