

Each week as I prepare for the sermon I go to a website – Textweek.com – and read what two people have written. First I read what William Loader, a professor in Australia, says about the themes and emphases for preaching from the gospel reading for the week. Secondly I read what Brian Stoffregen, who was in the class behind me at seminary, has to say about the Greek words in the gospel text. This week along with his analysis of the text Brian included this little piece:

Brennan Manning tells the story of an Irish priest who, on a walking tour of a rural parish, sees an old peasant kneeling by the side of the road, praying. Impressed, the priest says to the man, "You must be very close to God." The peasant looks up from his prayers, thinks a moment, and then smiles, "Yes, he's very fond of me." [pp. 68-69]

Jesus said, "As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love."

The love of God the Father, for God's only begotten Son – to that is what Jesus compares his love for you. "As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you."

Like that Irish priest I have seen all of you kneeling in prayer (bowing your heads in prayer) this morning. With him I could comment, "You must be very close to God."

How will you respond? Yes pastor, I pray three times a day, I keep all of God's commandments, I come here to worship God each week, I volunteer with Family Promise, I coach soccer, I teach Sunday School, I am a Girl Scout leader, I sing in the Praise Band, I serve on Church council, I help my elderly neighbors, I vote in every election, I tithe my income, I read my Bible Daily, I volunteer to visit those in prison, I help with communion, I give my clothing to Redeemer Crisis center, I put my coins in a Love Loaf, I have sung in the Senior Choir for over thirty years, I am faithful in my marriage, I bring canned goods to help families facing tough times, I put gifts on the giving Tree, I bless people through my work, I give to beggars when they ask me for a little something, I usher at church, I prepare the altar for communion, I water flowers at the church. I do all of these things to show my love for God. Yes, indeed, I am very close to God.

Or will you say, as that peasant did: "Yes, he's very fond of me."

Let us practice that response. Whenever I say: You must be very close to God. All of you respond: “Yes, he’s very fond of me.”

You must be very close to God. (Yes, he’s very fond of me.)

Jesus said, “As the Father loves me, so have I loved you, abide in my love. If you keep my commandments you will abide in my love.” Notice that Jesus did not say, If you keep my commandments I will keep on loving you. Jesus will always abide in his love for you. But will you and I abide, live, dwell, remain, (the Greek word there means all of these) will we abide, live, dwell, remain in Jesus’ love? Jesus says we will if we keep his commandments.

Now that sounds heavy, like a burden is being placed on us, a responsibility, a duty. But this is how Jesus thinks about it: “I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you and your joy may be complete.” Jesus gives you commandments so you will have joy.

Then he says, “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.”

Loving in the way Jesus loves – that will keep us in Jesus’ love, loving as Jesus loves will give joy.

I tried to teach the students in our preschool the meaning of the word joy - for them happy was the best word I could come up with. I decided the sign for joy would be a smile.

Jesus connects his joy to laying down his life for his friends. He says that as we love like that his joy will be in us. Now happy is not a word I would use to describe Jesus as he is laying down his life on the cross. Nor does a smile seem an appropriate sign for that moment.

Keeping Jesus command, loving as he has loved us often will not make us happy. Another quote from Brian Stoffregen this week was:

Mother Teresa said that America has become a selfish nation, in danger of losing the proper meaning of love: "giving until it hurts."

Love, Giving until it hurts. Jesus knows that is true of love, you know it to as you have loved when it has been costly. There is joy in costly love, giving until it hurts but not the kind of joy we would equate with being happy. Loving in costly ways will keep us abiding in Jesus love.

Jesus knows: he laid down his life for you.

Because Jesus did when I say to you: You must be very close to God. You will respond: (Yes, he's very fond of me.) Abide in his love. Amen.