

You Matter _____(Psalm 98; Jn. 15: 9 – 17) 21/5/06

"Love is dangerous" says a cover story article in the National Geographic.

Perhaps Jesus in today's Gospel text told us just *how* dangerous!

"Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends." Be prepared to give up that which you hold most dear to you, your very life even, for your 'friends.' That is even more challenging when you stop to consider how wide a definition Jesus applied to 'friends:' your neighbour; even he who says all kinds of bad things about you.

Jesus of course was prepared to literally *die* for His 'friends.' Thankfully, most of us won't be called on to go that far, for anyone, even for Jesus Himself, though we know Christians are still being killed in other parts of the world. However, in everyday life there are *countless* other ways that we are called on to 'lay down our lives' for others – that is, to give up other opportunities or wants, to give up doing something else, to give up even *being* someone else, in order to love others – to care for them, to give *them* better opportunities, a just wage, improved working or living conditions, encouragement, comfort, companionship, lend a helping hand, and to help them encounter the love of Christ in its irresistible goodness.

But the first point I want to emphasise today, to you young people in particular, is don't let anyone insist on telling you what the Bible says in any one, simple statement - *think carefully about what it means*. Particularly in the context (that is, the setting) of the *full story* of the Bible – of God's amazing love for humans and how *He* wants us to live. Jesus says in today's text, 'love others the way I, Jesus, have loved you, to the point that I am giving up my earthly life for you.' But note the context in which He is prepared to give up His life, the *context of such love* – *in obedience to the will of God*. Not willy nilly, not just giving up His life in some dramatic symbol of what it means to please someone, to make someone happy, to meet someone's *desires*. As even the little ones here know from the Christmas stories, Herod wanted to kill Jesus from the time Jesus was a baby. Herod wanted that badly. But God wasn't about to have Jesus lay down His life for such an ungodly desire. Satan too tried to have Jesus lay down His life in a way, by doing things He was not supposed to do – but Jesus said *no* – and *He stuck to that no*. Well before Jesus went into Jerusalem ready to give up His life on the Cross, we learn about occasions when many people got really upset with Jesus and tried to grab Him, take Him prisoner, stone Him. But Jesus was not about to lay down His life just to make them happy, not lay down His life to the extent of dying, or to lay it down to the extent of giving up the purpose of His life, giving up doing what He had to do, just to please the power hungry or to keep them quiet. No way!

Jesus was prepared to lay down His life only in obedience to God so as to meet an essential *need* of His friends. That is, of His disciples whom He was speaking

to, His friends the Jews in Jerusalem (even those who wanted to kill Him), His friends the *gentiles* in Samaria, Rome, the whole world, His friends not yet then born, *me and you*.

It was an essential *need*, because we, each and all, needed to be reconciled to God in the way intended when humans were first created, and in order to do so we had to find a way of getting rid of our sins. And we couldn't do so. But God could do so for us, by in His sinless perfection coming to earth as Jesus, living a sinless life, dying on the Cross, and being brought back to life in the glorious Resurrection. But there is something we have to do in all of this, if we are going to satisfy that essential need for ourselves, we have to *believe* - that is, each of us *individually*. From the time we are very small we learn John 3:16 - For God so loved the world, that He gave His only Son, that *whoever believes* in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life.

It might seem too simple, but that is what God Himself tells us is necessary. And as simple as it may seem, it does not appear to be automatic. Each of us *has to take that particular step himself or herself* - **believe**, or as it is more often put, *repent and believe*. Turn from our old life filled with *our* self and believe in Christ as the Son of God, who came to earth, died, was raised from the dead and returned to Heaven, - and receive Him as our only Saviour and Lord.

Last Sunday our sermon was entitled, "Family Matters." It sure does. But, as much as we need family to point us in the right direction, to protect us, to love us, to care for us, family *cannot* save us. Of course, neither can they *condemn* us! Christ has already done all that anyone else can do for us in this regard, the salvation or condemnation is dependent on us individually now: *I have to believe, each of you individually must make that decision to believe or not to believe.*

Now, the type of love that National Geographic was referring to was romantic love. And since we have these young ladies worshipping with us today, the first thing I want to say to you is to use Jesus' standard to judge the love of your boyfriend. Is he prepared to lay down his life for you? Not in the sense of going off to slay some dragon to protect you, or whatever other kinds of knight-in-shining-armour images best convey romantic love to young girls today! Is his 'love' for you the kind of love Jesus was speaking of? A love that is in accordance with the *will of God* for you and all that *you* were made by God to be? Is he willing to set aside those wants and desires that are just selfish, ungodly, like Herod's and Satan's and the people who were upset with Jesus? If you are old enough to know what I am referring to then you'll understand what I mean.

And you older boys, young men, does that passion you feel for your girlfriend come with the kind of love that Jesus was speaking of? Are you willing to 'lay down' your want for her to spend all her time with you in order that she can get the time to study and so develop her mind to be the person God intended her to be? To have the kind of life *in all its abundance* that Christ said she could

have through Him? Are you willing to 'lay down' any other selfish desires so she can be who she should be, a girl, a young lady, whose beautiful body is *hers*, as a precious gift from God? And young men, the same considerations apply to you. You have the same God given potential; your minds, bodies and souls are also gifts from God.

Young people, *you matter*. And I mean you, *individually*. The decisions that have to be made, the actions that have to be taken, have to be done by us *individually* – though I'll come back later to the context of that individuality. What you do as an individual is what matters. When you make decisions – which is all the time – remember the things you do can bring happiness *or hurt*, *help or harm*, to your 'friends.' And that these 'friends' include Christ, your parents, your pals – even a *future* husband or wife, a *future* child, and you do not want to bring to them any less than you could have, because of some recklessness. You also have to respect and love yourself. When Jesus said to love others *as* you love yourself, He did not give you the option of not loving yourself. There is no "if" in His statement. After all, He knows you are worth loving - because He already loves you.

Of course Jesus' instructions today are not only for young people. Perhaps, significantly, we need to note the use of the phrase '*to remain*' in His love, to *remain* in obedience to Him, so that He can *remain* in us. Remember that it doesn't stop with having *believed* in Christ at some time in the past. *It must be an ongoing state*. The verses immediately before those we read give a vivid illustration – a branch *must remain connected* to and a part of the tree if it is going to bear fruit. And throughout the Gospels Jesus stresses that to love Him, to love God, means to obey Him, and evidence of that means loving others as He loves us.

Scientists can now use all these new MRI and other imaging machines to see what part of the brain 'lights up' and the different chemicals it gives off in response to stimuli involving the different kinds of love. The scientists have even in this way discovered that in response to what they term the passion of 'new' romantic love – say showing someone the picture of their new spouse - a different part of the brain will 'light up' and give off a different chemical than when the brain is stimulated by images of other kinds of love. The particular article I referred to added that research around the world showed that the passion doesn't last forever – one even suggested perhaps if it did it would burn out the brain! It contended that that is why many marriages run into trouble after, say, four years – though I won't inflict on you the theory of why 4 years. On the other hand, the type of caring love that Jesus was referring to in today's text did not seem dependent on 'newness,' and it continued to get the same reaction from the brain year after year.

I think anyone who has been happily married for any length of time won't be surprised by that 'discovery.' We will have worked out for ourselves, that no matter how passionately we *romantically* love our spouse, unless we also realise that he or she is also our 'friend,' our 'neighbour,' in Jesus' terminology,

then we are in trouble. Until we start realising the many ways that Jesus' golden rule of treating others the way I want to be treated applies also to our spouse, we're in trouble. Until *I* realise that *you* matter for who *you* are, not *what* you are or mean to *me*, then we're in trouble. Once we can get to that level, I am not sure that the passion need ever end either, no matter what scientists say!

CS Lewis, who wrote The Chronicles of Narnia, including The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe, which was recently a very popular movie with young people, is one of my favourite sources for Theological insight.

After struggling to analyse, decipher and define different manifestations of "love," he came up with "The Four Loves" – which he termed as Eros (the romantic love), friendship, affection and *charity*. While I can't do justice to the depth and spectrum of thought in a Lewis book, a summation on the cover says that: [quote] "Lewis also warns of the deceptions and distortions which can render the first three – the natural loves – dangerous without the sweetening grace of *Charity*, the Divine love which must be the sum and goal of all." [unquote] God is love. But in today's Cayman when "love" gets blamed for all kinds of bad behaviour, whether adultery, protecting a criminal, or failure to discipline a child, Lewis also made the important distinction that "while God is Love, love is not God."

Getting back to our Scripture, as far as I can see, the Bible is very clear, repeatedly, on the absolute importance of the individual. That *you* matter, whoever you are. Jesus' parables on the one lost sheep, the one lost coin, the 'prodigal' son, His touching and healing the *individual*, His teachings, His time with the Samaritan woman at the well, His comment to Peter at the end of the Gospel of John, etc. and etc., could not, it seems to me, be any clearer. You personally matter to Me, "*you* [Peter] must follow me" – no matter what John does. And, take your pick: Adam, Eve, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Nehemiah, Paul, Steven, *you* matter, and what *you* do, matters.

There is a poignant, horrific account in Judges that makes vividly clear the terrible consequences when people lose sight of the intrinsic value of any individual. Of what happens when we start putting more emphasis on some supposedly *big picture*, some tradition, some noble cause even, and don't see the overarching affects on, or value of, the individual person, whom God has created, values and loves as *that individual*. There is a Bruce Willis movie with a scene that reminds me of this fact. In this scene the head bad guy asks the Bruce Willis character incredulously and contemptuously why would he jeopardise all of the NSA agents to protect one little autistic boy who, he says, is not even a 'whole person.' If you know the typical Bruce Willis character, I don't have to tell you the response!

The story in Judges that I am referring to is normally called The Levite's Concubine. There we see a Levite and his host prepared to abandon the woman to a mob of perverts – and actually the host was prepared to give over his daughters also - for a number of 'reasons:' to protect the concept of the

tradition of Jewish hospitality (apparently, though, only as it applies to the male Levite); to save face for the host in respect of protecting his guest, a stranger, as the norms of their society expected; and also I guess in their judgement that the man was more 'valued' than the woman. They throw the woman out to the mob and the next morning she is dead on their doorstep. Contrast that to the very similar episode when the 'strangers' visit Lot in Sodom and another group of men come banging on Lot's door with the same demands. Lot too is ready to send his daughters out instead, under the same corrupted sense of honour in his 'duty' to protect his guests. But the strangers say no. *They*, of course, knew what these daughters meant to God and what His love demanded – lay down your life for them if necessary. They stand fast together - and the men do *not* get their way. The girls, and the strangers, are all safe in the morning. Of course the perverts outside are incinerated with the rest of Sodom.

The story of the Levite's Concubine does not end at her death. Because of this failure to value her one life, thousands are killed and the whole tribe of Benjamin is effectively destroyed.

And another Old Testament story highlights for me how much *you* matter as an individual in another sense – to get things done, to allow the will of God to be carried out. Most of us are familiar with the Book of Ruth. It turns a number of expectations upside down. But I only want to note the fact that when Ruth goes gleaning in the fields, it is obvious that her mother-in-law and everyone else realises what is likely to happen to her as a lone woman out there. Now, that is *despite* all the great laws that Israel had, specifically providing for *protection* of widows like Ruth and giving her the right to glean the edges of the fields undisturbed. But everyone realised that these laws were not really going to protect her – until Boaz rides up, takes note of her, and tells the men to *make sure* no one troubles her.

We see the same situation today – no matter how good our laws may be, it takes the decisions and actions of each of us as individuals to abide by them, to respect them - in effect, to love our neighbour – in order for the laws to have the intended effect. Society, unfortunately, does shape individuals within it. But the state and shape of our society depends on the decisions and actions of the *individual*. We were not made as zombies that we have to do what 'everyone else' is doing. While the sins of the fathers are often visited on the children (that is because of the situations created by those old wrongs and the new generations not making the needed changes), it does not *have* to be that way. As God points out through Ezekiel, if "a son sees all the sins his father commits, and though he sees them, he does not do such things ... he will *not* die for his father's sin; he will surely live." In other words, stop blaming the past, the society, or whatever. It is what *you* do that will matter.

But the critical distinction to take note of from these Biblical accounts is that while the *individual* is absolutely essential in order for any action to take place, it certainly does not mean that we are to be individualistic. The message is clear that we were *not* to live and take our decisions and actions in the context

of the *individualism* that is now becoming so rampant in Cayman as elsewhere – actually what we used to call plain selfishness! When we take an action in the belief that because of who I am *my* lusts must be satisfied, or that I am worth more than the concubine, or that my honour is worth more than my daughter's, sooner or later the consequences will be ruinous. The good results only happen when we take our actions in the context of *community*, as God intended – where a Boaz realises that he matters only because Ruth matters too, and he must act accordingly. That is, in the joyful way Jesus said this morning, where you "love each other as I [Jesus] have loved you."

Amen.