

Our gospel reading for today is based on an idea that should deeply challenge and maybe even offend us. Now I know it's Mothers' Day, but the best way to get at how this passage is challenging is to talk about football.

Imagine that the Buffalo Bills have added you to their staff and exclusively given you the task of creating the team roster for 2012. Every Bills fan is now going to hold you responsible for how poorly they play. Of course if they play well, you'll get no credit at all. You've got lots of complications hindering your ability to put together the best team you possibly can. There's always the salary cap to deal with. There are contractual obligations to be kept. Players you may want to hire from other teams may not be available. Previous trades may limit what draft picks you have. On and on goes the list of complications.

Ultimately though, you are going to do the best you can to put together the best combination of talent you can. You'll try to get the best quarterback you can. You'll choose the people who show the best talent as receivers or the highest running

yards. You'll choose the person who is the best at kicking for your special teams squad. You'll assemble the best you can find for your defense. For each position you'll find the most talented player you can to fill that role. Hopefully you can put together a strong team with each player's talent contributing to the strength of the whole group. Even if you know nothing about football other than it's a bunch of guys who like to knock each other down a lot, this makes sense, right?

The Buffalo Bills list 80 some people on their roster. How would it be if on the first day on the job you fired the whole team, walked out of the administrative office and then hired 80 people you met walking down the street? ...You only thought the Bills had bad years! I will make you only one guarantee. If you did that the team would never manage a single score the entire season, let alone have any wins! Doing that would be ludicrous!

Michael Jasper is a defensive tackle for the Bills. He weighs 394 pounds. If I was a quarterback opposing the Bills and I saw that monster break through the line and come towards me, I'd drop the ball and run the other way! It's the only smart thing to do. Oh sure, he's not very fast, but at 394 pounds he's still a lot of man to get past!

I use the Bills as an example of something that happens in all of sports and in all of industry too. You put together the best collection of talent you can. Not everyone is good at everything - Michael Jasper would make one horrible quarterback - but the combination of strengths leads to a robust whole.

In 1 Corinthians 12 St. Paul uses this imagery to talk about the Church too. He says, "For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ." "Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. If the foot would say, 'Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,' that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear would say, 'Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,' that would not make it any less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose." (1 Corinthians 12:12,14-18)

This sort of thinking makes sense to us. We all know we have talents and abilities. We all know that other people have

different talents and abilities. We like to think that together we make a good team.

But this is not the logic of our gospel reading. Jesus' words there undercut any celebration of individual gifts or abilities. There is no ranking and no distinction between people. He says, "I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know that the master is doing; but I have called you friends..." He also says, "I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last..."

Jesus makes all equal. All are friends. There is no "best friends forever." There is no "facebook friend" or inner circle of friends. All are friends. And Jesus doesn't seem to have bothered putting together a particularly effective group of friends. The disciples were not particularly talented in anything.

It seems that the core qualification for someone to be Jesus friend is to live in love. What is this love, for we use the word "love" a lot and don't really use it correctly? The answer is in verse 3. I understand many soldiers scratch "John 15:13" onto their dog tags. "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends."

Jesus has called us friends, and he, like an equal, has laid down his life for us.

It is so tempting to want to do something flashy in our lives; something to be remembered by; something enduring. I laugh every time I walk into a hospital these days. It seems like every lobby, every hallway, every emergency room is named after somebody. Every time I go into Thompson Hospital in Canandaigua it feels like something else has been named for someone. I'm thinking about seeing how much I'd have to give to get a janitor's closet named after me.

People want things named after them so they can have something of lasting value. But they are missing the boat. What does Jesus say in verse 16, "And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, *fruit that will last...*" Things that endure are things that are done in love. You may never get anything named after you, but God knows and sees. And you don't just do things to get God's recognition or so that you stay in God's memory. The real work you do in love does last. The fruit is real

A gift; a gesture; forgiveness; helping someone out; recognizing someone's dignity when no one else is - these are all acts of true love.

It's Mothers' Day. It is a warm holiday that celebrates the love we expect mothers will have for their children. Any good mother will say that each of her children are different, but no one is greater than the other. Oh yes, some children will have more accomplishments than others. Some may be famous. Some may become infamous. Some will be successes and some will be failures. But a good mother will love them all. She will want each of her children to grow to his or her full potential. She may or may not have power to make that happen, but she will want it to happen.

So it is with God. We are all different. We are all individuals. And yet it is not the characteristics or even the gifts or talents we have that makes us important. It is our relationship to God. The mark of a church is how it loves, not who are its members, or what programs it offers, or what style or worship it has. There is only one gift - to bear fruit - we all have it. We all have the power to do something eternal. Any branch that remains with Jesus is nourished by Jesus and does great things. Amen