

Mother's Day gives us a good starting point to delve into what we discover in our gospel reading for today. Mother's Day is when we celebrate mothers, and we all have a mother. Someone gave birth to us. Someone shaped us in her womb. Someone gave us half the genetics that make us who we are.

Now you may have had a wonderful mother - someone who fits every stereotype of being loving and caring and nurturing and sacrificial for her children. If you did, great for you! Or you may have had a horrible mother. She may have been cruel and abusive. She may have hated you and been mean. But you still have a mother.

Perhaps your mother is alive. Perhaps she has died. Maybe you don't know; for some people know who their mother is and some people do not. Maybe you are the product of stereotypical loving parents who longed to have children and you were the result. Maybe you are a mistake, or a result of carelessness, or abuse, manipulation, or exploitation. Whatever the case, you still have a mother.

No matter the circumstances, there are two things we all have in common. One, we all have a mother. And two we all had no say in the creation of ourselves. We did not make ourselves. Someone else did. We are not the product of our own skills and abilities. Rather, we owe our very existence to people over whom we had absolutely no control. That powerlessness is the root of life.

This sense of powerlessness sends us to what is going on in our gospel reading. The scene is the Upper Room and Jesus' last supper with his disciples. He says that he no longer calls them servants - or in Greek it is literally "slaves" - but now he calls them friends. He calls them friends because while slaves do not know what the master is doing, a friend is a social equal. A friend knows what is going on. Jesus says, "... I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. You did not choose me but I chose you." And he goes on, "I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another."

There we have that word love once again. If you were here last week you may remember we talked about the word love and the way it showed up 28 times in just a few verses of our second reading. Here we have love once again.

Last week we talked about love being an act of self-giving for another. And in general we can talk about true love being doing whatever is in your power for the other person's best interest.

Those can be nice concepts, but they can be hard to live. Selfless love can be draining. It can be exhausting. Some people are hard to love. If we're honest with ourselves we all know people we'd rather just let suffer, than work to help them. Loving them is tedious and feels fruitless.

Selfless love gets complicated too. The book *Toxic Charity* asks a very difficult question. Do you want to help people so that their needs are truly met, or do you want to help people so that you can feel good about yourself? If you're doing it to feel good about yourself then you aren't truly loving them and you aren't truly serving them. You are serving your ego's own needs. As Lutherans we call this a "theology of glory". There are a lot of very giving people who only really give in order to feel good about themselves.

-Truly loving takes a different form.

-The true friendship Jesus talks about takes a different form.

A couple weeks ago we had our conference's spring assembly at Redeemer Lutheran Church in Rochester. Linda Flood and Pete Gregory went as our voting representatives. I pulled in several minutes late and I had to park about a block away. As I got out of my car and walked toward the church I went past a colleague who was still in her car. I said something sarcastic about being late and then I noticed she was crying. She rolled down the window and I discovered she was feeling sick and had even had vomited in the car and on herself.

My heart plummeted for being sarcastic to someone in distress and asked how she was and how I could help. She was kind of in shock and didn't know what to do. I said I'd go to the church building and get some things to start cleaning up. When I returned a few minutes later she finally got out of the car and took a couple paper towels and started cleaning herself. I started on her car. She said I didn't have to, but what was I going to do? Was I really going to let her stranded in filth? No. She was sick! I didn't help so I could feel good about myself. I did it because she's a human being who needed help.

Truly loving another person is not rooted in feeling good about yourself. Nor is it rooted in a feeling of obligation or

guilt. Truly loving another person is rooted in something else we all have in common.

We have in common that we all have a mother and we had no say in our creation. We also have in common our need for salvation and forgiveness.

We may have money and education and a safe neighborhood. We may use our power to create wealth and comforts for ourselves. We can use our medical knowledge to prolong and enhance life. But we do not have power over everything - death is proof of that. Some people get that. Many do not, preferring to live in the myth of the strength of their power.

I've always appreciated what the Rev. Craig Satterly, who used to be a pastor at Bethlehem Lutheran Church in Fairport, and who is legally blind, said, "Being blind, I can't delude myself into thinking I can do it all the way other people can delude themselves." Those who deal with addictions, like tobacco or alcohol know how powerless we humans really are.

I think it's interesting, but the root of truly being loving is knowing that you are truly loved. And the root of truly being loved is realizing that you need it.

What made those 12 disciples qualified for Jesus to call them his friends and no longer servants? Did they learn it all? No. Were they now courageous enough? Certainly not! Did they now have enough faith that they didn't need Jesus' constant presence to continue on their own? Nope. What did they have?

They knew they needed Jesus. Ironically the fact that they knew they needed him meant that he could actually leave them!

That is the irony of our lives and the irony of our love. If you think you have to be filled with blessings and strength before you can help others you're going to fail. If, on the other hand, you know how much you need love, you know how much you need forgiveness, and you know how much you need God's grace the more you are able to give and give and give. You can love deeply, truly, and without expectation of return.

May you truly know how much you need Jesus, and may that shape all of your thoughts and actions. Amen