



as certain doom. Am I ready to do that? Am I able to do that? to give up my life for my friends?

But that's precisely *not* the point. Jesus isn't telling us how bad it's going to be for us. He's telling us how much he loves us. The ultimate expression of love would be to offer one's life for another. That is what he's about to do for his disciples. That's how big God's love is. And "As the Father has loved me," he says, "so I have loved you; abide in my love."

This is the goal and the purpose not just of Christian life but of all human life: to love one another, to share deeply in the interconnection of friends, friends with one another, friends with God. And what this love is leading us toward, as Jesus says here, is not anxiety. It's joy.

"I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete." The immense generosity that God shows us in Jesus is the critical, the central thing in our faith. The love that leads to joy. "I do not call you servants any longer. . . but I have called you friends."

People experienced some terrifying times of change in the 14th century: the Black Death. The great mystic Dame Julian of Norwich lived through that time. She nearly died herself, and as she lay on her deathbed, she had a vision—no, really, much more than that, a vivid experience of Jesus' death. She recovered and spent the rest of her life trying to understand what all that had been about. And here is one of her reflections:

From the time it was revealed, I desired many times to know in what was our Lord's meaning. And fifteen years after and more, I was answered in spiritual understanding, and it was said: What, do you wish to know your Lord's meaning in this thing? Know it well, love was his meaning. Who reveals it to you? Love. What did he reveal to you? Love. Why does he reveal it to you? For love. Remain in this, and you will know more of the same. But you will never know different, without end. (*Showings*, ch. 86, tr. Colledge and Walsh)

That's what our life in Christ is about. That's what our life in the church is about, even if we're slow to understand and practice it. "You are my friends," says Jesus. "I love you with the same love that God pours out on me. Abide in my love. Love one another."

Now, I suspect some of us are thinking, "It's not that easy." Yes, I know that. We're not talking about some simple formula for overcoming the sorrows, the distresses, the complex conflicts of this world – or the equally complex conflicts of the church. You and I aren't going to be transformed immediately into perfect lovers, either of God or of one another.

Still, it's the only path that leads us back to God and to our true selves. We have a long way to go, a lot of conversations yet to pursue, a deeper knowledge of God's love to discover. I hear excellent things about the people of Church of the Advent; but I take it for granted that you're not perfect. (I have no evidence of that, to be sure; I'm just assuming.) Tim Mitchell – he's good. But he's probably not perfect, either.

But Jesus in our reading doesn't say, "Be perfect. Then love one another." And, of course, the disciples he was talking to at that moment mostly ran away in just a few hours, when he got arrested. No, the command is simply "Love one another as I have loved you." We begin with the learning of love. We continue with the learning of love. As Dame Julian wrote: Remain in this, and you will know more of the same. But you will never know different, without end.

And how do we learn love? We learn that we are loved ourselves. We practice being respectful of one another. We learn the kind of humility that allows us to grapple together with the issues that face us, without cutting one another off, without going behind each other's backs, without simply insisting on having our own way.

This love doesn't mean "Anything goes." It's not the theological equivalent of "Whatever." If it's like Jesus love for us, then it's going to be a demanding love. But it does mean that we keep on thinking of one another as sisters and brothers, even when we disagree. This is the profound lesson that the church is learning anew in its present difficulties, the profound gift we're receiving anew.

"You are my friends. Love one another as I have loved you." However difficult the process of learning and living into this may be, it has the power to transform.

Exactly how all this will come to life here, you will learn as you experience it. I pray that you and Tim Mitchell will have a good, long while to pray and celebrate together, to grieve and hope, to fail and try again. But here's the goal: to see the immense generosity of God, the inexhaustible love of God, touching fire to this community. As that happens, you will find new hope and joy in the

love of one another – and not just within the confines of this parish, but extending outwards toward the whole world that God also loves.

The warmth of such a love will invite others into the circle of friendship, into the fire of love that has given *us* hope and strength and generosity. It gives life and hope.

A celebration like this one reminds us that, even in the midst of change and uncertainty, we are also on the threshold of new understanding. The love of God is not something we can own or get command of, that we can plan into our calendars and have done with. No, God is intent on making friends of us and is prepared to dog us until we wake up to the possibility. God is gracious – even as Julian liked to say, "courteous" (which was a rather sexy word in the 14th century). But God's purpose is to transform us by love, making our lives larger and more able both to give and to receive.

And the goal of it all is joy. Remember what Jesus says: "I have said all these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete." It's not too much to hope for. It's already been promised. I wish you more of it than you ever dreamed.