

Sermon, May 17, 2009...St. John's, Roanoke:

Two senior citizens were living in a Florida mobile home park, one that catered to retirees from up north. The man was a widower and the woman was a widow. They had known each other for a number of years. One evening, there was a community potluck at the big community center. These two folks ended up at the same table, sitting across from each other. As the meal went on, he made a few admiring glances her way and finally gathered up his courage to ask her, "Will you marry me?"

After about six seconds of 'careful consideration,' she said, "Yes, yes, I will."

The meal ended and with a few more pleasant exchanges, they went to their respective places. Next morning, he was troubled. Did she say 'yes' or did she say 'no?' He couldn't remember. Try as he would, he just couldn't recall her answer; not even a faint memory. With trepidation, he went to the telephone and called her. First, he explained to her that he didn't remember as well as he used to. Then he reviewed the lovely evening. As he gained a little more courage, he then inquired of her, "When I asked if you would marry me, did you say 'yes' or did you say 'no?'"

He was delighted to hear her say, "Why, I said, 'Yes, yes I will' and I meant it with all my heart." Then she continued, "And I'm glad that you called, because I couldn't remember who had asked me."

It has something to do with love, doesn't it? Living the good life, I mean. It has something to do with the way we handle our inheritance. Comedy routines abound with the scenes of the family and friends seated around the attorney's desk as the last will and testament is read. It is always the worthless nephew or perhaps the mistress who gets all the worldly possessions. The attorneys in the congregation of St. John's will tell you that the real world scene is much different. Many will tell you that families are often torn to shreds in attempting to divide the accumulated stuff of this world or the savings of the preceding generations. Someone has suggested that the true character of a family is best demonstrated as they attempt to divide an inheritance. Sadly, some families have shown no character at all.

Today I want to talk about another kind of inheritance, a legacy left by a Galilean peasant spiritual leader who is about to be executed by the authorities precisely because he called them to task about the way they were mishandling an inheritance. He gathered his followers around him, a small band of a dozen or so, to bid them farewell. In John's telling of the Good

News, the Gospel for this Sunday comes from what is called the “farewell discourse” of Jesus to his followers.

What is it that he left those who would choose to follow him, both then and now? The great Good News of this day is that we have an inheritance, a legacy, far more valuable than a rich relative may leave us. We are the heirs of the King of Kings and this is his legacy, this is what we have inherited.

First, we have inherited a new ethic based squarely on love. As subjects of this King, a new way of doing things is required of us. To keep his law we must accept his love, return his love by loving others in return. The word translated into English as “abide,” literally means to “tabernacle with.” It means to live inside his love. Abiding in his love and keeping his commandments means we will strive to love one another. This is the condition upon which the rest of the legacy depends. Our relationship with the King of Kings is based on love. Apart from receiving his love and returning his love to our fellow heirs we cannot receive the rest of our inheritance. The reason we cannot receive the rest of it is that, apart from the radical demand of love, we cannot begin to understand that others are equal heirs with us and the equality is not based on skin color, social standing, accumulated wealth, or any other external standard we may wish to use. Those who would accept this inheritance live under the ethic of love.

We also inherit a new independent reality of life that is best described as joy. Receiving the King’s love and striving to love him and our fellow heirs, we discover a new and perhaps strange reality of life that is best described as deep, soulful, joy. This reality is not based on wealth, vocation, or career advancement. It can and does flourish under the most adverse conditions. Mother Teresa was once asked what kept her going. She said, “The assurance of God’s love and the resultant joy that it brings.” Joy among the starving and dying of Calcutta? By the standards of the world that is the last place one would look for joy. But we are not talking about the standards of the world but God’s standards. Most of the time those are polar opposites.

Take a look for a moment. There he was, at the end of his earthly life, and what had he accomplished? Just twelve had been called to hear the message and carry it forward. One of them would betray him, one would deny even knowing him (not once, but three times!), most of the others ran away at the first sign of trouble. Only the women would stay by his side. He was about to die in agonizing pain and public shame, yet he exuded peace and joy and gave that gift to his followers. This is the joy that the world cannot give, cannot take away, and will never understand. Pleasure is fleeting; the trinkets of the world turn to rust and are moth-eaten, decay, or

are destroyed. Love alone endures and it produces joy that reproduces itself in others and lives on.

Finally, we inherit a new status that is best described as friendship. Servants are kept in subordinate roles. Friendship sets aside differences in rank and status. As inheritors of this King, we are accepted as friends, because we have received the legacy of the Father. It is God's saving grace in Jesus Christ that overcomes the barriers we erect between other persons and ourselves. It is this legacy that creates new communities that are marked by his love and joy. When these communities operate properly, we welcome the stranger into the new fellowship where love and joy are the watchwords.

We voluntarily take on the role of servant to others because we have been freed of having to be servants. Friends serve friends, not because they are required to do so by social position or cultural norms but because they love one another. This is the amazing paradox of Christian freedom that we have inherited.

This inheritance, this legacy, is not a fantasy. This is the Gospel, the Good News of God in Christ. It is, in fact, the divine comedy because not one of us is worthy. All of us are like the worthless nephew. The amazing thing is that this inheritance, this legacy is not given because we deserve it, but because this King of Kings loves us!

If we believe we are loved and accepted by the one who offers such an inheritance, such a legacy, we will strive to live by this new ethic of love, we will accept an independent reality of life called joy, and we will enjoy a new status of being called friends. And never forget; the true character of this family is shown by the way we handle this amazing inheritance. Amen.