

How Deep Is Your Love?

You are my friends.

For those of us who have shared this orientation retreat, four days ago, most of us did not know each other.

Yet after opening up to each other,
and trusting each other with our very personal stories,
we have come to know and to trust each other.

We will, I hope, learn to rely on each other when we need help,
and to repay that reliance with help as needed.

We have not, however, come to seminary with the primary purpose of making new friends. Each of us has been called, in one way or another, to deepen our knowledge and to use it to help others.

In the first letter to the Corinthians, Paul writes that some are gifted to preach, some to teach, some to have faith, some to heal, some to work miracles, some to prophesy, some to discernment, some to speaking in tongues and some to interpretation. Likewise, some of us will be called to pulpits, some to chaplaincy, some to teaching, some to helping in

neighborhoods, towns, and rural areas, and some to other work.

We have come because we have been called – whether we heard the voice of Jesus, or the Holy Spirit, or the Creator, or by a voice inside of us that said “you need to learn this”. Some of us, like Isaiah, said “Here I am, Lord, send me!”; others, like Moses, argued against it; or, like Jonah, ran away.

Yet we are here because, whether willingly, reluctantly, or doubtfully, we have answered the call we heard. Jesus told His disciples “You did not chose me: I chose you”, and likewise we have been chosen to the tasks which are ahead of us, however hazy the view may be.

The hymn goes “what a friend we have in Jesus”, and indeed this is true, as long as we keep his commandments. And Jesus's commandment to his disciples is “Love one another”. And so it is good that we are friends.

But if we are to answer our calls, each in our own way, to serve the world, then we must also be *more* than servants to others: we must also be *friends* to others. More than just preaching and teaching, healing and prophesying, we must be friends to those who need us. “Love one another” does not only extend to those close to us here, but also to those who need to be loved.

But how deeply should we love? How much of a friend must we be?

The verse prior to the Gospel reading gives us Jesus's example:

“There is no greater love than this, that someone should lay down his life for his friends.”

Does that mean we are called to be *martyrs*?

It is helpful to know that martyr means witness. And it *is* possible to be a witness while still alive.

We all know about Jesus's sacrificial *death*, but it is much less often that we think in terms of Jesus's sacrificial *life*. Jesus's ministry before the crucifixion is an example of giving one's all to a calling. For those whose theology supports that Jesus, as the Logos or as God, existed before coming to be born of a woman on Earth, Jesus gave up heaven to be with us. For those whose theology sees Jesus as becoming more than human, Jesus had the power to rule the world (and was tempted by Satan to do so), but gave it up to follow his calling. For those who see Jesus as a human teacher, Jesus gave up a future with a family and a career in carpentry to carry a message to the people.

Even without the cross, Jesus gave up a lot to follow his calling. It is unlikely any of us will measure up to that level of selflessness. Even so, we have to ask ourselves how much we are willing to give up to be friends with those we are called to serve.

The path ahead will not likely be an easy one. Most of us have expressed financial and time concerns regarding seminary.

Because we all have relationships – romantic, family, and friendships – these concerns will affect others. We may be asking people we love to make sacrifices as well. It is even possible that the amount of time, talent, and treasure consumed by these calls may stress these ties to the breaking point.

Some of us, myself included, have doubts about our callings. We may have low self-esteem, or fear of the unknown, or other life issues that make it hard for us to believe we have been called.

For many of us, this step is a big risk. As Jesus called Peter, Andrew, James, and John to drop their nets and follow him, so many of us are dropping what we have been doing to answer our calls.

We are taking risks. We are making *living, loving* sacrifices. We are living our love for God or for the people we will serve.

I am making this challenge, to myself and everyone here:

That we live our love for God *and* live our love for others.

It is possible to get into the rarefied air of deep theological thought and to forget about the reality of those around us who suffer. Yet it is important to remember that the poor, the hungry, the sick, the lonely, the naked, and the imprisoned are real people who need real friends.

Chicago Theological Seminary uses the phrase “Ministry for the Real World”, and that is that kind of ministry to which I believe we are all called. And if we are called to *real* ministry in the *real* world, we need to be *real* friends with *real* love for the *real* people we are called to serve.

I'm going to give you one of the easiest homework assignments you've ever had: it won't be graded – you don't even have to turn it in. I'm assigning it to myself too.

This week, I'm asking that we pray, meditate, journal, consider, puzzle over, ponder... whatever it is each of us does, over one question. The question is:

How deep is your love?

Please forgive the Bee Gees reference.

I want each of us to consider how far we are willing to go to answer our calls. I want to ask myself: “How much am I willing to give? What do I treasure so much that I am unwilling to let it go? What are the limits of my love?”

We may all be surprised by our answers. I hope we are also changed by knowing them.

Jesus said:

“This is my commandment to you: love one another.”

Amen