

A couple weeks ago, I learned that the father of one of my best friends in high school died. I reached to him and the family to express my condolences, and that brought back a whole lot of memories. Like many friendships, ours was based on the foundation of mutual interests and a similar sense of humor, and over time, we picked up each other’s mannerisms. For my part, at least, I can say that I wanted to be like my friend.

The apostle John, who is responsible for writing the Gospel that bears his name, along with three epistles and the book of Revelation, enjoyed a friendship with Jesus which is reflected in his written work. The close relationship between John and Jesus is evident in the way John says things. You can hear Jesus all through it. When you compare the epistle lesson with the gospel lesson for today, it’s as if the same person is talking. It sounds like John has absorbed Jesus’ teachings to the point that he speaks with his Master’s mannerisms. So it should not shock us too much to learn that what John says is challenging, uncompromising, and truthful, just like Jesus.

Just like Jesus, John links love for God with obedience to his commandments. That sounds simple, but if you take it seriously, that’s pretty provocative. John says, “If you really love God, you’ll obey him.” And he goes on to say that “his commandments are not burdensome.” You might be thinking to yourself, “Oh really? Not burdensome? God’s command to always love and forgive—not burdensome? God’s command to love others as we do ourselves—not burdensome? Does John know what he’s talking about?

Well, yes he does—don’t forget, he was perhaps Jesus’ closest friend. And there’s the key to understanding the link between love and obedience. By nature, we resent anyone who tells us what to do. We will, however, on occasion, listen to a trusted friend. We will listen to someone whom we know really cares. This is what John is getting at, and what Jesus is saying to you through the words of today’s Gospel.

Jesus defines for us the greatest test of friendship: “Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends.” Think of some of your best friends—the people you love spending time with—the people you have shared so much with—the people you can be yourself around. Now ask yourself—would you die for them? Sometimes there are heroic people who do just that.

Consider the life and death of Marine Corporal Jason Dunham. In April 2004, while leading a patrol of his Marines in an Iraqi town near the Syrian border, a nearby Marine convoy was ambushed. Corporal Dunham led his squad to the site of the attack, where he and his men stopped a convoy of cars that were trying to make an escape. As he moved to search one of the vehicles, an insurgent jumped out and grabbed the Corporal by the throat. The Corporal engaged the enemy in hand-to-hand combat. At one point he shouted to his fellow Marines, “No, no, no, watch his hand.” Moments later, a grenade rolled out. Corporal Dunham did not hesitate; he jumped on the grenade to protect his fellow Marines, using his helmet and his body to absorb the blast.

A friend who was there that day put it this way: "Corporal Dunham had a gift from God. Everyone who came in contact with him wanted to be like him. He was the toughest Marine, but the nicest guy. He would do anything for you. Corporal Dunham was the kind of person everybody wants as their best friend." Despite surviving the initial blast and being given the best of medical care, Corporal Dunham ultimately succumbed to his wounds. And by giving his own life, Corporal Dunham saved the lives of two of his men.

Jesus Christ has proven his friendship to you in the most extreme way possible. Because of our inability to love and obey, we deserve to be blasted with punishment. That's not going to happen, thanks to a Friend who loves so fully that he takes the impact of your sin and guilt upon himself. That is friendship. That is love. He did it to claim you as his friend forever. I've had great friends throughout my life, and they've been very good to me, but they've never done that. They didn't suffer what I should have suffered. They didn't die what should have been my death. Only Jesus did that. Only Jesus could. What a friend we have in Him!

Since He has done this for us; since it is His desire to call us His friends, that changes the whole way we look at the idea of obedience.

What I mean is simply this: Most of the time, you will do whatever you can to help out a friend. Even if it means shuffling your schedule and sacrificing valuable personal time, you'll do it precisely because that person is your friend. You do it, not out of fear or obligation, but because of a bond of love and friendship.

As John writes, "God's commandments are not burdensome." Now we can see why. Friendship with Jesus transforms "ought to" into "want to" and "got to" into "get to," because we know how far He is willing to go to help us.

Today, it's my prayer for you, Lindsay, Dakota, Jonathan, Jack, and Scott, that you will maintain friendship with Jesus throughout your entire life, and that He would matter to you so much that you would pick up His mannerisms and become more like Him a little more each day. Today He will give Himself to you in the bread and wine of the Lord's Supper. You now have a new way to spend time with your Best Friend. Treasure it. Let Him bless you. Then go out and be a blessing to the world.