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Thankful Memorial Episcopal Church, Chattanooga

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I have been thinking a lot about friendship and how it is an act of love, lately. You see, when we talk about love we often think first of romantic love. It is, after all, the type of love that is shown to us most often in movies, tv, books, magazines, and social media, but friendship, too, is an act of love. An act of trust, an act of faith. Friendship involves a mutual sharing with one another, a giving of a piece of oneself to the other, if you will.

Friendship can be one of our most important relationships because it is love given and love received with no obligation, a kind of love that has the power to make us more ourselves because the more we are loved for who we are, the more we allow ourselves to fully be who we are. And who we fully are is who God made us to be, and is exactly who God loves us as.

Loving myself for who I am—being my authentic self—has been one of my particular challenges. A challenge that was brought up time and time again in my discernment process, and once again in seminary, something that prompted many letters to my bishop, and a lot of doubting and pleading with God, and ultimately I am coming to the place of beginning to understand:

that if I can not be my full and complete self and be valued for that, than it is not something worth doing.

This is why the Gospel is so worth doing because in its most concise form it is the proclamation that God loves us—completely, truly, deeply, and fully—as we are. And it is through such complete love that we are able to grow and continue to become who we are. We have been loved like this by God since before we were able to even comprehend what love is, and we will continue to be loved like this by God forever, even when we forget or go astray or when we hurt or when we doubt or when we need a break.

This kind of all-encompassing love has been the overwhelming message for me this Easter.

This Gospel passage from John is part of the reading we heard on Maundy Thursday where Jesus illustrates what love is by washing the feet of his disciples, by serving those who wish to serve him.

'I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.'

But the people so gathered at the table with Jesus in this scene are not only his followers, but are his friends, his companions, and closest confidants. The act of friendship most assuredly shaped them, changed, and moved them, just as it does us, and this is because God, above all else, desires to be in relationship with us.

God desires for us to be in relationship with God's self. And it is not a long-distance relationship either because the cross and resurrection point us to the intimacy of God's love in that there is nothing that can separate us from this love, not even death, not even death on a cross.

The cross is not a tool to be used against others—we have seen, firsthand, the horror and trauma and degradation of such an instrument used by the Roman empire to maximize the pain and suffering of those whom they punished. This kind of suffering and pain and loss and death already exist in the world, it is not our job as followers of Christ to perpetuate the pain, but rather it is our duty—and our greatest privilege—to share the love of God that has so profoundly changed and moved us that we can't help but let it overflow from our very being.

This is what we have seen in our Gospel readings this Easter season, a love that overflows in abundant goodness and shows up in our everyday lives.

Though, just like friendship, being in relationship with God requires a mutuality—a giving and receiving of love and trust and faith. It is the case that God's love is always freely given and given abundantly, and it is also the case that we need to respond to that love. We must choose to act on that love, to receive that love, to live into that love as best we can where we are right now.

I have been thinking a lot about friendship in this season because in the last couple of years a friend of mine died quite suddenly and I had not really taken

the time to fully process her death and the mark it left on me. Like any person we love—and friendship is, indeed, an act of love—she left a friend-shaped hole in my heart when she died. An absence that I hadn't fully processed until recently.

Of the many things the pandemic did to me, one of the toughest has been how it dampened my emotions, put me in a shell of myself, made me shut down in some ways because of being in a perpetual state of fight or flight.

I am not alone in this.

The emotional, social, and mental toll of the pandemic has been felt:

by our teenagers, who are struggling more than ever with their mental health,

by our children, and most especially children who experience poverty and other social limitations as they fall even further behind in school and in building social connections because access to the internet and other technologies is still a privileged thing,

has been felt by women and people of color, as the burden of violence and control weighs on decisions about health care and safety and access to weapons,

has been felt by the people of Ukraine and Russia,

has been felt by those of us who have lost the sense of community, or who we were pre-pandemic, perhaps there are things we took for granted that were suddenly taken from us and left us reeling.

The thing is: things will not be like they were pre-pandemic. In fact, things must change moving forward.

The good news is that our faith already knows a lot about that.

You see, after the cross and resurrection, things are not the same—and that is the point. That is the point John makes in his Revelation to the seven churches: hey, I have seen the kingdom of heaven and it is a place centered

around the tree of life, where water flows freely and tears are no more, it is the place where God dwells with mortals and mortals dwell with God and we are no longer separated by all that keeps us apart now.

God became flesh and dwelled among us, things are not how they used to be, and that is a good thing.

It is good to remember that even in the most chaotic and wretched of times that God has not given up on us, and we should not give up on God either. Even as things look and feel different, the love of God endures. It is us who change, not God, not God's love, not God's desire for us to love God more fully and deeply. It is us who change, and not Jesus who changes to fit our needs.

Living a life of faith is living a life that constantly changes and yet trusting that the one thing that does not change no matter what is God's love. The cross and resurrection have already shown us for all time that God's love is the foundation of everything. That is also what John's revelation seeks to show us in vibrant imagery—that God's love endures all manner of things, and that even when things are bleak, God has not pulled away from loving us, but rather has drawn closer and closer to us, dwelling with us, constantly calling us to be in relationship with Godself.

So, I have been thinking a lot about friendship, and, it turns out, thinking a lot about the love of God, and how that love has made me more fully who I am.