

Some of my worst experiences growing up had to do with being chosen...or I should say with NOT being chosen...On the playground or in gym class, I hated when the time came for the captains to choose **teams** for baseball, kick-ball, or whatever the game...I recall standing there as kid after kid got picked ahead of me,... & I'd be praying "O, God, please let them choose me next...pleasee." ...& when they didn't,... I'd be thinking, "How could they take that kid instead of me...he's such a loser?"...When I finally got picked - especially if I wasn't one of the last ones - man, it felt so good...I'd be strutting around...It's always a great feeling to be chosen,..isn't it,... to know that we are wanted, that we are valuable ?.

In our Gospel, Jesus tells His disciples: " It was not you who chose me; I chose you."...My friends, the Son of God, the Chosen One of God, has chosen US,... & - as we heard- He has chosen us not to be His servants, but to be His friends... He is the One who says to us: "Here I am! I stand at the door & knock. If anyone hears my voice & opens the door, I will come in..." Jesus knocks on our door. He wants to enter into our lives... Why?...Well, in verse 9 He says: "**As the Father loves me, I also love you**" ...Wow!...He's saying He loves us in the very same way...with the same depth & passion that God the Father loves Him ... That's some powerful love...He loves us in spite of everything we do that is contrary to what He wants for us!...And **He calls us friends!**...

.....Someone once defined a friend as "Someone who knows all about you, & likes you anyway."... This is how it is with Jesus...He loves us with all our imperfections, our bad habits, our bad tempers, our bad behaviors,...even our bad breath....Yah, He loves us just the way we are,...but He knows we can be better, & He won't stop trying to make us better....**And He calls us friends!**... He wants to be right there in the middle of our lives... He wants to be a close friend, a real friend, not just an acquaintance...

I read about a rich woman in South Carolina in the 1950's - whose neighbor had just died...At the funeral, she went up to the neighbor's maid, & said , "I'm so sorry about Miss Lucy's death...You must miss her greatly. You were such good friends."...The maid replied, "Yes ma'am, I miss her. But we wasn't **real** friends.".. ... " I thought you were," said the woman..."I've seen you laughing & talking together many times" ... "Well, yes,...we've laughed together, & we've talked together,... but we is just acquaintances. . You see, Miss Lucy & I, we ain't never shed no tears. Folks got to cry together before they is **REAL** friends."

Jesus IS a **REAL** friend...He cries with us & cries for us...when we are hurt, when we are lost, when we are afraid...He knows what our life is like...He lived it... He walked our walk...He knows the troubles, trials & tears that life can bring.... Knowing that Jesus loves us with the same love that the Father loves Him., - love that carried him thru betrayal & torture & crucifixion - ...knowing that when we are troubled & hurting, our friend Jesus cries with us,...these are reasons for us to be filled with total & complete joy...That's just what Jesus says to His disciples in verse 11 of our Gospel: "I have told you this so that my joy may be in you, & that your joy may be complete." ...He wants us to experience the complete joy that comes with knowing that we can count on His love,..His friendship... to help us make it thru anything.

Now real friendship is always a two-way street...Friends do for each other...So, what does Jesus expect of us if we are to be His friend?...He makes it pretty clear in our Gospel: "You are my friends if you do what I command you, ....& this is My command,.."**That you love one another as I love You.**" ...**Jesus is saying, if you want to be my friend, then you have to love my other friends the way I love You**...Now, whenever Jesus spoke about love, He wasn't talking about love like that between a boy & a girl looking into each other's eyes under the moonlight,...or that lightning bolt of love when parents see their baby for the 1<sup>st</sup> time...Those are feelings & emotions that are not in our control. Even Jesus can't command feelings or emotions...They just happen.

The love He commands of His friends is **agape**' which is Greek for *self-giving love*,... the love that Jesus modeled for us...love that is a conscious decision, not an emotion...It is the love that says, "I choose to do good for you...even when you don't deserve it... even when I don't like you or don't like what you do. ...even when you don't thank me... even if you're my enemy...Agape is unconditional love. ...Agape is selfless love that often requires sacrifice,... & in some rare cases, the supreme sacrifice: "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends."

During a bombing raid in the Viet Nam war, some shells landed on an orphanage run by missionaries...wounding several children,... including an 8-year-old girl who was in critical condition and needed an immediate blood transfusion...Several of the uninjured children had the right blood type...So, the doctor, who spoke very little Vietnamese,...tried to explain to the frightened children that unless they could replace some of the girl's blood, she was going to die...The doctor asked if any of them would be willing to give blood to help her...The children all stood there silent, eyes looking down at the ground. ...After several moments, a little hand went up slowly,..."Oh, thank you!"... the doctor exclaimed. "What's your name?"..."Huong," the boy replied....Huong was quickly laid on a table, his arm swabbed with alcohol, & the needle carefully inserted into his vein... As the needle went in, Huong covered his face with his other hand and began to sob uncontrollably.

"Does it hurt, Huong?" the doctor asked...The boy shook his head NO,...but he kept sobbing,...tears trickling from eyes...Something was very wrong...Just then a Vietnamese nurse arrived to help...She spoke to Huong in Vietnamese...She listened to him, & stroked his forehead, & reassured him...After a few minutes, he stopped crying, & a look of relief spread over his face...The nurse then explained to the doctor, "Huong misunderstood you. He thought he was going to die...He thought you asked him to give ALL his blood to save the little girl."..."But why would he be willing to do that?" the doctor asked. ...The nurse repeated the doctor's question to Huong, and he answered simply, "Because she is my friend."

Have we ever had a friend like that? ...At least one that I know of. It was on a hill called Calvary, outside the city wall, overlooking the town dump...It was there that your friend and my friend died so that we might live..."No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends."

OK, here's the big question: I want Jesus to call me FRIEND,..but can I ever love the way He loves? I mean,...He's Jesus Christ, the Son of God...It's gotta be impossible for you and me...But just look at who Jesus first chose for His friends:... impatient, hot-headed fishermen...a tax collector who swindled his own people... Peter, the ROCK, who denied Jesus three times,...and even the man who would betray Him.

Compared to that bunch, we don't look so bad. ...Jesus wouldn't have given us the command: **love one another as I have loved you**, if He didn't think we could do it...He sees in us what He saw in those first disciples... He sees not only what we are, but what we can become: His friends, His disciples who will bring His love into our hurting world ...He knows we can't do it on our own, but with the Holy Spirit to empower us & guide us,... & His precious Body & Blood to strengthen us, He knows we CAN do it...And when we do, it will show the world that we belong to Jesus Christ,...that we are His friends.

**As that old hymn goes: They will know we R Christians by our love, by our love. They will know we are Christians by our love." AMEN!**