Sermon, May 5, 2024
"Thawing Out"
Sixth Sunday of Easter, Rogation Sunday
St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Wilton, Maine

Let's begin with a little trip back to high school or college English class – don't worry it won't be too painful – no grades – no essays – not even any pages to read but let's turn to a scene from that great English classic by Charlotte Bronte, "Jane Eyre"

A young man has received a call to be a missionary in a foreign land, but won't be able to go unless he takes along a wife. He approaches Jane, a governess, and tells her of his intention to take the Gospel to the heathen, asking her to accompany him as his wife. Whereupon Jane asks him to consider first whether or not they love each other. He answers that love has little to do with it. It is the propagation of the gospel that should take precedence. Jane Eyre, chilled by this, turns and walks away from him, saying: "If there is no love for each other, for those who walk upon the earth together, then there can be no love of Christ."

How can love be a commandment— a law—and also a strong, vast current beyond our comprehension and control? We explore this morning that line from the gospel "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you". So maybe here's where the grades come in. How are we doing at loving one another?

There's a term that sometimes gets applied to churches that have been around for a while with folks that mainly have been around for a while (who us?) called the "Frozen Chosen". The term refers to those Christians who are more reserved in their religious life. One church website identifies the stereotypical frozen chosen as the folks in the Presbyterian and the Episcopalian denominations, though really the members of any church (in any denomination) can be labeled as "frozen." It just has to do with how stiff and reserved they are. Now I hate that term and I want to make it perfectly clear that I don't think that term applies to the good people of St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Wilton Maine, in 2024, but . . . but if you went down to our new coffee shop in town or maybe even hung out with Justy at the boat ramp and did some surveys of what people thought about "church folks" in general, well you might get some responses related to the frozenness of our chosenness, if they considered us chosen at all.

What do we do? Even if stereotypes are unfair, you have to work extra hard sometimes to overcome them. What do we do? As God's chosen people, we are dearly loved, and we are called to abide in that love. Think of it as a plant whose roots grow deeply into the soil of God's love and purpose. With such nourishment and encouragement we

cannot help but grow. When the church, the Body of Christ, in whatever context it is planted, is active in the business of cultivating disciples to love, serve, and know Christ intimately, then the church will flourish in its call to abide in love with joy. So our mission as a congregation is to thaw ourselves out, continually.

Now the experienced cooks here know there are a few different ways to thaw out frozen food. There's the quick ways – plunge in cold water or nuke in the microwave. Now that may work for your frozen chicken thighs but it is better for both the chicken and us as a congregation to thaw slowly. Perhaps the winds of change will bring a rain of prayer, a season of discernment, and the tools to dig into scripture and forge strong, vital relationships that will lead to a generous expression of joy and service that defines God's chosen people as those who love. This world needs to know that we are Christians by our love.

So we have one more clue in how to obey that impossibly large commandment – to love one another – as Jesus says today, "you are my friends if you do what I command you". Frederick Buechner describes friends this way,

Friends are people you make part of your life just because you feel like it. There are lots of other ways people get to be part of each other's lives, like being related to each other, living near each other, sharing some special passion with each other like P. G. Wodehouse or jogging or lepidopterology, and so on, but though all or any of those may be involved in a friendship, they are secondary to it.

Basically your friends are not your friends for any particular reason. They are your friends for no particular reason. The job you do, the family you have, the way you vote, the major achievements and blunders of your life, your religious convictions or lack of them are all somehow set off to one side when the two of you get together. If you are old friends, you know all those things about each other and a lot more besides, but they are beside the point. Even if you talk about them, they are beside the point. Stripped, humanly speaking, to the bare essentials, you are yourselves the point. The usual distinctions of older-younger, richer-poorer, smarter-dumber, male-female even, cease to matter. You meet with a clean slate every time, and you meet on equal terms. Anything may come of it or nothing may. That doesn't matter either. Only the meeting matters.

We bear the fruit that Jesus asks us to bear when we act more friendly, not in the sense that we are unfriendly but in the sense that our relationships approximate the nature of best friends, "besties" in the popular jargon. What if we looked on those in our congregation, our community, even those chance encounters with someone that turns into something meaningful as, well, as friends. Why we'd be thawing out and ready for

the oven of Pentecost. Perhaps we can remind ourselves of the great commandment and the call to bear fruit by reminding ourselves of some great lines about friends:

"*Lean on me, when you're not strong, and I'll be your friend, I'll help you carry on, for it won't be long, 'til I'm going to need somebody to lean on.*" ~ Bill Withers (1972)

"*In good times, in bad times I'll be on your side forever more, that's what friends are for.*" ~ Carole Bayer Sager (1982)

"*I get by with a little help from my friends.*" ~ Lennon and McCartney, 1967

"*Don't walk in front of me, I may not follow. Don't walk behind me, I may not lead. Walk beside me and be my friend.*" ~ Albert Camus

"*If a man does not make new acquaintance as he advances through life, he will soon find himself left alone. A man, Sir, should keep his friendship in constant repair.*" ~ Samuel Johnson

"*Make new friends and keep the old, one is silver and the other gold.*" (Girl Scout Song)

"*You've got troubles, I've got 'em too. There isn't anything I wouldn't do for you. We'll stick together to see it through cause you've got a friend in me.*" Randy Newman, 1995

Quotes and songs on friendship abound. But the best quote on friendship of all comes from the best friend of all, Jesus. "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends".