



## Chrism Mass and Renewal of Vows, 2014

### John 15:9-17

<sup>9</sup>As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. <sup>10</sup>If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. <sup>11</sup>I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete. <sup>12</sup>“This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. <sup>13</sup>No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. <sup>14</sup>You are my friends if you do what I command you. <sup>15</sup>I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. <sup>16</sup>You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. <sup>17</sup>I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.

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I want all of us to take a moment and think back—whether back means many years ago or a week ago—I want all of us to think back to a time when our vocation as a lay person in the world, as a deacon, as a priest or as a bishop came to us, enticing us, ensnaring us, enfolding us in some sort of sense that to say “yes” to it would be to come into our own in Christ in some real and authentic way. Maybe that moment was a moment of elation; maybe it was a moment of fear and confusion; maybe it was a moment of dread. What was that moment for you? Where were you? What were you doing? What were you feeling?

And now I want you to take another moment—this time, think of something your vocation has asked you to sacrifice. Who in your life or what in your life has had to pay a price as you have said “yes” to your vocation? And because vocation is a dynamic thing, who or what might need to pay a price for what's emerging even now in your vocational life?

I begin with these questions today at our Chrism Mass and Renewal of Vows in that I want this liturgy to be about renewing our vows through getting in touch with the lived reality of

our vocational lives to include the remembered moments in which we heard a call in all its power to entice and, yes, ensnare us, as well as the real price we and others have had to pay as we have said “yes” to that calling.

In our Gospel lesson taken from what are called Jesus’ “farewell discourses” in John, we hear Jesus speak of “friendship” as the new relationship he has created with his followers. The Greek word he uses here for friend is *philos*, meaning someone who loves.

In speaking about friendship, Jesus joins many ancient Greek and Roman thinkers who regarded being someone’s friend as one of the most ennobling of human relationships and activities. These very understandings would have been known both to the author of John and to the audience of the Gospel of John. These understandings are also found in what John’s Jesus focuses on in his words to the disciples.

The first of these is extreme, for it’s the idea that a friend is one who would be willing to give his life for his or her friend. To cast it in more contemporary language, if I am friend to you, your welfare, your hopes and dreams, your very life is so important to me that I am willing for my blood, both the symbol of and reality of my life, to be shed.

But in Jesus, of course, the idea of befriending becomes the enactment of befriending. For Jesus doesn’t just talk about things—he is them; he does them. And so the very pattern of Jesus’ life enacts this idea. Jesus lays down his life for his friends and in doing so, shows his disciples and us what loving and befriending another will mean: the freely given outpouring of life for the sake of the other.

But the Gospel of John doesn’t stop there. For right along with this notion of friendship comes a second one. Jesus expresses to the disciples: “I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father.”

And so God’s friendship also has something to do with transparency, authenticity, what ancient writers of the time called “*parrhesia*,” that is plain, direct speech as opposed to flattery or holding back. A way to think about this is that Jesus is God’s “plain speech to us,” the Word coming to us in our own language, in fact in our own flesh, the Word revealing to us and uniting us to the heart of God’s very self.

And so today, as we reflect on our vocations and vows: our vocations as laity in our roles and relationships in and for the world, our vocations as deacons in action and advocacy for those with no voice and no standing, our vocations as priests, gatherers and householders through word and sacrament, our vocations as bishops, charged with seeing and leading the whole based on the apostolic core, in our vows we, all of us, are the enactment of God’s outpouring of life and God’s transparency, authenticity and direct speech, both of which have already come to us in Christ Jesus.

Vocation and vocational discernment of all kinds are fascinating to me. What I have learned is that vocational discernment can come to us like the bite of a wild animal that draws blood we would sooner keep as our own, and also comes to us like the kiss of a lover who woe us

to himself or herself promising intimacy and fulfillment. Yes, vocational discernment shows up as both of these things.

My own experience bears this out and so I offer it to you in the hope that you may see yourself in some part of it.

When I was thinking about whether to agree to stand for one more Episcopal election and all that it would mean—the exposure, the humility it would take, the mistakes I would make, the loss of a place and people I loved—when I was thinking about whether to stand for election again, I had the following two-pronged conversation with myself and with God.

The first was about sacrifice. “I will do whatever you ask of me” I shouted to God in my version of prayer as I walked my dog each morning. “I will give whatever you ask of me...but you have to make it clear that this is what I am to do!” What I think I was saying was this: “I realize, God, that if I do this, there will be a price for me to pay. And yet, O Lord, I will do this. The only thing I ask of you is that you speak with some power and clarity to me and to others that this is what you want for me and want for us.”

And so sacrifice, at least in my life, is worked out in prayer and with the gnashing of teeth! Do you see yourself in this?

But then something else emerged. I began to ask myself: “What will I do if I am *not* elected this time? How will I wrap my mind around a belief that the call was real and that I was not elected?” Which then led me to ask myself this: “What does the vocation of Bishop mean to you, Melissa?” And the answer that came to me immediately was this: “The vocation of Bishop means moving more deeply into my own authentic self in Christ, a self offered directly and plainly to others.” And then I heard what seemed to be God responding to me, though I had not asked for a response: “Do it now.” God seemed to be saying, “Don’t wait for an election. Move more deeply into your authentic self in Christ now. Offer it now.”

And so, today our vows are not just about remembering a time in the past when we responded to God and embraced our vocation, though it’s important and even sweet to do this. Today is about deciding whether we will say “yes” to the continuing life of vocational discernment which can be relied upon to ask us to pour out our lives for the sake of the Church and the world now, to become our plain, direct and authentic selves in Christ now; to offer that self now.