

John 15:9-17

Jesus said to his disciples, “As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. 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. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.

“This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. 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. 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. I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.”

Mean Girls Meet the First Amendment

The story I heard about it said it was “*Mean Girls Meet the First Amendment.*”¹ It was about a case that has made it all the way to the highest court in the land, the Supreme Court. A few years ago, a 14-year-old sophomore at a Pennsylvania High School tried out for her school’s varsity cheerleading squad. She did not make it and was left spending another year on JV. In a moment of outrage while at a local store, she took out her phone and made a video of herself and, of course, with a friend in it. She says in the video, and I’ll paraphrase here, “F*** school, F*** cheer, F*** softball, F*** everything,” while displaying a certain hand gesture that emphasized her point.

She shared the video on the social media app called SnapChat where videos are sent to friends that disappear after 24 hours. One of the friends was the daughter of the cheer coach who showed it to her mom who showed it to other coaches at the school who suspended the girl from the cheer squad for a year. Naturally, the cheerleaders mom and dad did what any good American parents do when their kid messes up, they filed a lawsuit saying that their daughter’s 1st Amendment rights had been denied. She is free to express herself outside of school without facing repercussions from the school, they argued.

¹ Click [here](#) for link.

So the justices have to decide where freedom of speech begins and ends in the digital age. While you might not be familiar with *Mean Girls*² -- the 2004 Lindsay Lohan film that captures just how mean high school girls can be in a funny and heartwarming kind of way -- you may recall the 1969 Supreme Court decision in *Tinker vs. Des Moines* when the court decided that students were allowed to express themselves freely in school as long as it was not overly disruptive to the learning environment. The 1969 case included 13-year-old Mary Beth Tinker who apparently learned in church about the depths of God's love and decided to wear a black armband to school to protest the Vietnam War only to be suspended for it.

Like some of you are thinking right now, I am tempted to reflect on these two very similar but very different cases and what they say about how much parenting, family values, and adolescence has changed in our country over the last fifty years. In the first case, the Supreme Court upheld an American's right to protest for religious and moral reasons a war that history has not looked kindly upon. In the second case, I reckon the court will uphold the argument of this family who is saying that even teenagers have a right to express how they're feeling. And isn't it just wonderful how with social media everyone in the world has a microphone so no thought or feeling goes unshared with the world? (I hope you can hear my sarcasm in that question.)

Yes, I am tempted to critique parenting and teenagers and our social-media-instant-gratification culture, but that's too easy. There's no helpful way to compare generational differences and we are left only with stereotypes and cynicism when we try. I do know that next week at our 8:45 service, the bishop is confirming many teenagers of this parish. While I cannot say that our kids would never express themselves as I described, I can say that they have taken their faith seriously over the last year of their lives and beyond. Next week they are going to make promises of baptism with their own lips and hearts, and in so doing they will compel us to remember that God has made us his children even though we are likely to have moments in our brokenness when we would think if not say, "F*** everything."

Next week we will renew our own baptismal covenant, which we are only saying because these teenagers are making a public profession of who they are and who they hope to be. We will realign ourselves with God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, with Christ crucified, risen, and ascended, with life in the Spirit. These teenagers and adults will lead us in committing ourselves to sharing in life with the church, to proclaiming the Gospel in word and deed, to loving neighbors and enemies, to respecting the dignity of every human being. And they have committed themselves to not just read the news, but to read the Gospel as well.

Again, my point is not really to compare teenagers or to compare past decades in America with our current moment. Nostalgia for an idealized notion of the past is a punching bag that's too easy to hit that will bloody your knuckles and only strengthen muscles of cynicism and despair.

² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EMzEmGfTuM4>.

My point is that we should always be comparing the culture of our hearts and society with the Gospel of Jesus Christ. And when we hear our Gospel reading today and we think about the promises we have made in baptism, this entire Supreme Court case looks very differently. Even the First Amendment -- as important as it is -- doesn't read the same through the lens of the cross.

"No greater love has any one than to lay down one's life for one's friends." That's what Jesus has told of this morning in a Gospel passage that is right before he bends down and washes the dirtiest part of his disciples, in complete servitude to them. While I am glad to live in a land with freedom of expression, I am longing to live a life where I might give up my rights for the sake of the Gospel. Which right did Jesus claim on his way to the cross? What dignity did he insist on preserving? What defense did he argue before the court? He was too dedicated to giving his life away in love to claim any right or dignity and in so doing he did to that court in the 1st century exactly what he is doing today to our court in the 21st century. Jesus whom we call victim and judge makes the entire case, the headlines, the whole conversation to be found wanting. Having seen God's love poured out so freely, we can only long to live lives that aren't about taking up every right and privilege we are owed but about giving our lives away in sacrificial selflessness to a world so often lost in self-obsession.

Back to the cheerleader, I'm not sure exactly what the video looks like that she could have made in light of the Gospel. I'm wondering how she might have loved like Christ loves her. I'm wondering how she might have laid down her life for her friends. Perhaps it was no video at all or perhaps it was a year in service to her younger classmates. But I will say that she has a good case. It seems she does have the right to freedom of expression, just like we all do. The question is not about what rights we have. It's about what rights we are willing to give away.