

“Friends”

John 15:9-17
Sixth Sunday of Easter

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Christ the King Lutheran Church
May 6, 2018

“I really don’t have any interest in making new friends. I just want my old friends back.”

I have a friend who said this to me several years back and I’ve never forgotten it. Now, I admit, it might sound a bit weird out of context; it helps to know what was going on in her life at the time. Although she had grown up in the Twin Cities, she had spend the last 15 years or so elsewhere—on the West Coast, down South, in the Northeast. At the time she said this, she and her family had just moved to Saint Paul, both to be closer to extended family and taking some big steps forward professionally, for both her and her spouse. Actually, given the way these things often work for many of us, there was a sort of chicken-and-egg syndrome about how they ended up back in what had been her childhood home. Did they seek professional opportunities primarily in places close to family, was it a happy coincidence that close family and some old friends lived, or was it a little of both? Did they even think about such things ahead of time, or was it more sub-conscious, a subliminal tiebreaker question as they plotted the trajectory of their lives.

Whatever it was, as they were unpacking their belongings, trying to fit their furniture into their new house, deciding what other things they had to sell, buy, or replace, getting their kids settled into new schools, figuring out where the best grocery stores were, testing out which churches felt the most like home, discovering what routes would be the most efficient to their respective job sites, she also articulated this insight: how much more difficult it was at her age to be a stranger in a strange place, to make new friends, especially friends with any staying power, friends that would share the depths of her life, friends that would endure, friends that would go deeper with her and she with them.

“I don’t have any interest in making new friends,” she said. “I want my old friends back.”

Now, if you knew my friend, even if you had just met her, you’d likely say to yourself, now that’s one friendly, outgoing woman. As you exchange some small talk and start to make connections with her—as she is particularly gifted at doing—you might even find yourself saying, she’s so easy to talk to, so easy to connect with, I bet that person makes friends easily and often. That is, I don’t think anyone, meeting this friend of mine for the first time would ever imagine her saying, “I don’t have any interest in making new friends.” Quite the opposite, I would wager. So what did she mean by that? As we talked about it, I realized that her distinction was actually less about new versus old—she was actually quite open to making new friends. Rather it had to do with what exactly those

“old friends” she was thinking about and missing truly brought with them in terms of friendship. Depth. Authenticity. Vulnerability. Endurance. Agility in the face of change. Closeness despite physical distance. In other words, a friendship that abides.

As we continue walking through these fifty days of the Easter Season, this Sunday’s image of the life the risen Christ shares with us is one of friendship. It builds from a longer, more complex—even at times convoluted—address that Jesus gives his disciples before his death, as he prepares them for what life without him is going to be like. Last week’s gospel lesson featured this word “abide,” repeated several times over. Coming from the Greek work “Meno” and meaning to dwell, to remain, or to endure, *abide* describes how the disciples of Jesus are to remain connected with and in relationship to Jesus even after they are physically separated from one another. In that reading, Jesus uses the image of a branch abiding with the vine, drawing strength from it, and eventually bearing fruit as a result of that patient endurance, that steadfast remaining, that ABIDING. Jesus tells his followers to stay deeply rooted to him. He calls on them to stay close to him for the long-term, assuming longevity not just for longevity’s sake, but in order that together they might endure changes, weather storms, stay the course of being Jesus’ presence out there in the world.

Today, we hear another word repeated over and over: Love. Jesus reminds us to keep his commandments, and says that when we do, we abide in his love. He commands his disciples—including us—once again to love one another as he has loved us, and he tells us that he considers us his friends: not servants, not students, not subjects. He reminds us that he chose us—each and every one of us—to go and bear fruit in the world, that is, to love one another, to love the whole world, to love all of creation in Christ’s name.

Equipped with that love, we are called to serve others as Jesus came to serve; but for John and his gospel, the image of servanthood is somehow too foreign, too distant, too hierarchical to capture the essence of life with the risen Christ. For servants, the incentive for action is obedience—which is not in and of itself a bad thing, but too often ends up being motivated by fear. Jesus says so often to his followers, do not fear; and inspired by this, the author of First John says “there is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear.” So instead of servanthood, Jesus speaks of friendship. Friendship which captures the love, the joy, the deep mutuality of the relationship into which Christ invites us, beyond duty, beyond obedience, beyond fear. This is the mutual love of Christian community, created by God, commanded by Christ, and empowered by the Spirit.

From age 7 to 13, I lived in Baltimore, a place that most of us may not think of as the deep south, but that had a number of customs, at least back in the 70s

when I lived there, that were prototypically Southern. One of them had to do with names—specifically, the versions of the names we called one another. There was a formality back then, back there, that insisted that you called someone you were just meeting by their last name, with an appropriate title: Mr Johnson, Mrs Smith, Dr Clark. That part's not particularly Southern, but this part is: as a child, when I was addressing adults I knew—folks who were actually quite familiar to me, as in my friends' parents or grown-ups at church, I was expected to address them by a title and their first name. Ms Betty, Mr Vern, Ms Naomi, Mr John. It's actually the only context that kids calling my dad "Pastor Perry" actually made logical sense, as it fit the pattern of what they called all adults. There was a simultaneous formality and familiarity in this pattern. I felt the difference between calling my Sunday School teacher Ms Katie and my principal Dr. Kohlmeyer. But I also understood the distinction between calling my friend Robbie and calling his dad Mr. Tom. And I don't know if this was limited to our neighborhood in East Baltimore or maybe even to St Peter's Lutheran, but there was even a tradition that certain coming-of-age milestones like confirmation or high school graduation, grown ups would tell the kids that now they could call them by their first names. Which was such an honor, such a meaningful moment. And which lasted about a week or two, until the younger generation, despite the invitation, recalled how great it was to have that sweet spot, that balance between familiarity and formality with the older generation, meaning in our church you'd find 40- and 50-somethings regularly referring 60- or 70-somethings around them as Mr. Bob, or Ms. Alice.

In a way, Jesus makes a similar distinction with the disciples. He says he is their friend—and he acts like it, too. He is willing to give his life for them, which of course, he does. At the same time, it is clear that he is not his disciples' *equal*. Though he adapts the idea of being Lord and Master in the ancient sense by making himself more available, more approachable, more accessible to the disciples, he maintains a place slightly apart. He is God, after all.

But Jesus, God incarnate, God-with-us, calls them "friends" precisely because he has shared with them everything he has learned, everything he has seen, everything he has experienced in terms of his relationship with God the creator. To be a friend of Jesus is to be a friend of God. To know Jesus the Risen Lord is to be invited into friendship with God, to know the very heart of God. And to be a friend of Jesus is in fact to be chosen by God.

This text was actually the text for my ordination, and in the sermon he preached on that day nearly 24 years ago, Dr Robert Harry Smith, he cited a little bit of doggerel—a rhyme he used to hear in his youth and childhood in Sunday School and elsewhere—which went: "How odd of God to choose the Jews." How odd of God to Choose the Jews. But then, he added, how odd of God to

choose any of us, to call us friends, to appoint us to particular tasks, to equip us for work in God's mission, to trust us enough to be sent out with the life-changing good news of resurrection and new life, of reconciliation and forgiveness, of mercy and justice. How odd of God to choose us. How odd of God to call us friends. How odd of God to expect us to bear fruit. How odd of God to suppose we would remain, endure, abide. But that's exactly what God has done. We're exactly who Jesus has chosen.

Friends, let us abide deeply in Jesus' love. Let us remember and let us remind one another that we did not choose Christ, but Christ chose us, and appointed us to bear fruit, to bear witness, and to bear one another's burdens. Let us recall that we were chosen not because of what we've done, but chosen because of who Christ is. Let us recall that we were chosen to abide, to endure, to remain.