

Sermon: “My Friends”
Scripture: John 15:9-17
Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans
Date: My 5, 2024

The passages we are reading at this time in worship are moving us from Easter and the resurrection appearances of Jesus to his Ascension next week and Pentecost which comes the following week, May 19th – which will be a special service, btw, because the choir will be doing the Schubert Mass as the center-piece of that service.

But for now in this Eastertide we are given these texts from the Gospel of John which are referred to as the Upper Room Discourse or the Farewell Discourse of Jesus, his words that prepare the disciples for what comes next, not a dis-passioned monologue as it is often read but rather a passionate offering of comfort and care to prepare the disciples for the difficult reality that they are about to face with his suffering and death on the horizon. The Gospel writing can be read in a double way – Jesus speaking to his disciples just before his death and ensuring them that in the end everything will be ok AND it’s also a text written for a community of Jesus followers around 90 CE that were facing persecution and rejection from synagogues because of their claim that Jesus was the Messiah and so the words are encouragement for them as well to remain true and faithful and encouraged despite their suffering. Jesus is saying essentially – “stay connected to me, despite the difficulties you are facing, don’t be drawn out of me and away from me, remain rooted in me as the vine, be my branches. Now that you know me stay with me, don’t be swayed by doubters and persecutors, remain true. Remember you are a part of me

and I am a part of you. You are in me and I am in you. Remember that, know that. Abide in me and allow me to abide in you.”

And today this poignant passage where Jesus says – “listen, you are no longer to consider yourselves in service to me but you must know that you are MY FRIENDS in service to the world. You are my friends.”

What an incredible thing that Jesus, the enfleshment of God, uses the concept of friendship to encourage the disciples, to speak of their relationship to him and to God. Friendship. Not slave or servant or subject or student or soldier, but friends. Isn't that beautiful?

Jesus as friend. It suggests at least three things about our relationship with the Divine. First of all **friends are freely chosen**, a gift of connectedness and fondness that cannot be forced or required. Similar to falling in love, we fall into friendships naturally and easefully, don't we? They come as gift from beyond ourselves, involving our free choice. The minute friendship becomes a requirement it's something less than friendship. Friendships just work in an easeful natural exchange of ourselves with another. Our relationship with God, with Jesus, can so easily get caught in moral requirements of should's and shouldn't's – I heard once that we are often “should-ing” all over ourselves and others - but when Jesus says here “you are my friends”, he is asking something different of us, a different order of relationship, that comes more from the heart and the love that is there. I am your friend, he says, and you are my friends. It's a beautiful poignant thing. *Philia* is the Greek word for this kind of love and care, a good synonym is fondness. Who are the friends in your life that you are very fond of? How might that fondness translate into how you understand your relationship with God?

Secondly, friends are not only freely chosen in a spirit of fondness but **friends are also equals**. The power dynamic that can involve domination and expectation and fear and force is removed from the equation and there is an equality that places us and our friends on the same level, not separated in any way. Again, what a remarkable thing for Jesus, God incarnate, to invite us into this mode of relationship, a friendship where we are equal with God, the Source, the Redeemer, and Sustainer of all things? Paul in his famous letter to the Philippians says that “Jesus himself being in the very nature of God did not consider equality with God something to be grasped but took on the nature of a servant.” Philippians 2:6-11. And then Jesus turns around and say to his disciples you are not be servants but my friends. Jesus empties himself out and makes a way for us to enter into a relationship with God heretofore unheard of and unattainable, a relationship of friendship through and in him.

But Jesus does have a requirement involved in his invitation to friendship, which seems odd at first – if you do this you will be my friends - but it does speaks to the truth of friendship. Jesus says that we must follow his command in order to be his friends. “You are my friends if you do what I command.” And what does Jesus command us to do? “My command is this – to love one another.” Even more than the spousal relationship formed out of eros or romantic love, the love of friendship is a love that is not turned into one another but opens out to what is beyond the friendship. Usually friendship derives from a common interest and care in something else, a common purpose and drive that binds one to the other. If the spousal relationship is two hands clasps together in love, a friendship is two hands clasped and facing together out into the world to be mutually facing the world together. Friendship is not a closed system but an open

one and in Jesus' invitation to be his friend this is critical that there arises a common task. Our friendship in Jesus is a friendship that puts us in common cause and common purpose with Jesus where we care for what he cares about. Our fulfillment as human beings becomes us in mission and service to the world as Jesus would have us serving his purposes of world-creation and world-restoration.

You are my friends, Jesus says. And what a friend we have in Jesus. How about we sing this oldie but goodie as a way of ending my sermon if you will...