

Easter VI B
May 6, 2018

Grace Church, Lexington
Fr. James
+

Acts 10:44-48

Psalm 98

I John 5:1-6

John 15:9-17

“I Have Called You Friends”

The Clergy Journal shared disturbing information about making friends: 60% of men over 30 cannot identify a single person they would call a close friend. Of the 40% who list friends, most were made during childhood or school years. Most women can identify 5 or 6 women whom they call close friends. A closer look shows that a lot of these were functional relationships. Friendship is not easy to develop.

Our lesson is about friends and friendship. If it has never occurred to you before, note that Christians were called "friends" before they were called Christians. That's right. The New Testament says, "it was in Antioch that the disciples were first called 'Christians'" -- long after the death of Jesus and the dispersion of his disciples in the early days of the church. But Jesus himself said to the disciples, "I have called you friends."

Think about that. Let it sink in. "I have called you friends." Before anything else. "I have called you friends." David Leininger, Jesus' Friend

Friends and family, and as the years go by the friends often become closer than family. I have made a few friends through the years, many of them in congregations where I have served. I remember well Don Hoyt. He was on the committee that called me to St. Luke's, Jamestown, N.Y. He was one that pushed me in a number of areas during interviews and when they called me I turned them down. I simply did not think that they needed me, or that I needed to be in that congregation. I continued to pray about it, but my decision was made. And then Don emailed me and told me why he thought I should accept their offer. And he didn't give up. He stuck with it. I asked him to give me a couple of weeks. When the two weeks were up, he was on the phone. He was able to pray as well as I. Finally, I accepted. And so the friendship began. I was fairly often in his home. Sandra, his wife, also promoted the friendship. When they heard I was going to propose to Mary Jane they offered their home with its fireplace and

romantic setting as a place for me to do the deed. I recommended them as hosts at the Episcopal Cottage at Chautauqua and I think it made the difference in their acceptance. Don and I went once to the head of the Department of Religion at Chautauqua, to Ross MacKinsey, to express our concern that there were so few people of color on the grounds for a week with the theme Black Issues. When Don was dying he asked me and this same man, Ross MacKinsey, to give ourselves to an email correspondence between the three of us that would serve to help each of us deal with important issues of our own lives, Don's being his imminent death. We agreed and I remember writing a long email, one in which I attempted to be quite vulnerable, and then I didn't hear from either of them. A week went by, two weeks....I began to wonder if I had offended one of them and then I received a call from one of Don's four children. Dad was dying, she said, and wouldn't last long. By the time I called back two or three hours later, he was gone. My friend was simply gone. That was maybe eight years ago, and yet even today Don's death has left the biggest friendship hole I have

ever known. In some ways we were like minds. He was a college professor in Cleveland; he was a convinced and well-read Christian. But most of all for me; he was my friend. Irreplaceable. I have other friends from that congregation, and some of them I see every year, but what Don and I exchanged in friendship was way beyond the usual.

Would it be an exaggeration to suggest that what Jesus and his disciples shared was something like that? I suspect not. John wrote in the Gospel that Jesus said “I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father.” The exchange between them was significant, but not necessarily because of its weightiness, but because it was shared. Friendship like that is rare. It is different from and beyond agape love. Love is an act of the will. You can love someone simply because you decide to act toward them in ways that enrich their lives, not necessarily your own. Sometimes I think, loving acts preclude friendship. That is, sometimes I give to someone I love and respect in ways that makes the relationship virtually a one

way relationship. We do that in outreach programs where we give Christmas gifts or work through the church to provide free meals. Those are loving acts, acts we intend and can carry out. Sharing the faith, now, in a committed dialogue that has both a posture of listening and learning, as well as imparting and teaching, might well lead to deep friendship and lifelong change for both parties. That is the 'fruitfulness' Jesus was encouraging.

In a beautiful sermon entitled "The Power of Love," Paul Tillich, one of the great theological minds of the twentieth century, writes of a Swedish woman who aided prisoners and orphans during the first World War. She ended up in a concentration camp herself because she gave aid and comfort. Tillich writes, "It is a rare gift to meet a human being in whom love – this means God – is so overwhelmingly manifest. It undercuts theological arrogance as well as pious isolation. It is more than justice and greater than faith or hope. It is the very presence of God in the form of a human being. For God is love. In every moment of genuine love we are dwelling in God and God in us." Patricia de Jong, *Partners and Friends*

I read a story of one who claimed that he was loved by Jesus. It reminded me that I have been convinced for years that at the very deepest level of your being you are loved by Christ. Want to know who you are? That is who you are-one who is loved by Christ. Want to know what meaning your life has? You are loved by Jesus. Friend first, then Savior and Lord. Want someone else to know who you are? Let them know in some clear way that you are loved by Christ. And the love of Christ carries with it the offer of friendship, which must be developed like any friendship.

William Willamon, Chaplain at Duke for many years, tells this story on himself. "On my way out of the church late one afternoon, I was chagrined to see, coming towards the church down the walkway, a rather forlorn looking man with a small bag, obviously a wanderer, a vagabond, a drifter, obviously coming toward the church seeking a handout.

"This is what you get for having a church situated near a busy highway. These drifters drift through about twice a week, seeking a tank of gas for their trip, a meal, a gift -- preferably in

cash -- for their journey to who knows where. They always have some sad story of woe to tell but the end is always the same -- can you spare about \$25.00 in cash.

“I sighed as I watched the man approach. It had been a long day. I had a meeting to return to for that night and I was anxious to get home. I would meet him at the door, head him off, give him the only cash I had -- a mere \$15.00, as I recall -- and then send him, and me, on our way.

"What can I do for you?" I asked with some annoyance in my voice.

"I wondered if you might be able to help a fella' on the way South," he said. "I was headed down to...."

"Yes, yes," I said. "Well, I'm in a bit of a rush. So here is all I have. A five and a ten. That's all I've got."

“The man took the money as I offered it. Looked at it. And without a word, he turned, and headed out toward the street. Then he stopped, and turned toward me as I locked the church door. "I guess you think I'm supposed to thank you, to be grateful," he said

with a surprising tone of defiance.

"Well," I said, "now that you mention it, a little gratitude wouldn't hurt."

"Well, I'm not going to thank you. You want to know why?" he sneered. "Why?" I asked. "Because you are a Christian. You don't help me because you want to. You have to help me because he [now thrusting his finger up into the air] told you to help me!" And then he left. "I stood there, stunned, angry. The nerve of these people! "On my drive home it finally hit me. He was right. Amen.

William Willimon, *Commanded to Love*

Sometimes love comes out of simple obedience to our Lord's command, but friendship will go beyond simple obedience. It will encompass the other's life. A man took soup to Washington D.C.'s homeless until one evening a man threw a jar of very hot soup back at the man and broke the near boiling jar of soup over his head. The homeless man was angry because the man was feeding him like he would a dog. He wasn't interested in his name, who he was, how he got there. His act of love had nothing to do with the

man himself. There was no offer of friendship, getting to know the homeless man.

Erich Honecker was deposed as East Germany's chief of state while the country was undergoing tremendous change. The turmoil in East Germany received a great deal of attention, but an unpopular act of Christian reconciliation went mostly ignored.

Honecker was widely hated by others. After being ousted from his position, he was not allowed to live in his luxury villa. A Lutheran pastor offered to let the homeless Honecker live in the pastor's guest room. The pastor even paid Honecker's expenses. This was especially surprising since Honecker had once persecuted the church.

This move was widely resented. Many people threatened to quit the church (and some did). The pastor received vile phone calls. Arthur Paul Boers, Lord, Teach Us to Pray, Waterloo, Ontario: Herald Press.

That pastor gave an act of love. He couldn't have appreciated Honecker or approved his life and behavior, but he could act in a loving manner.

You will remember Jackie Robinson as the first black man to play Major League baseball. In his first season with the Brooklyn Dodgers, Robinson faced venom nearly everywhere he traveled. Pitchers threw fastballs at his head. Runners spiked him on the bases, brutal epithets were written on cards and spoken from the opposing dugouts. Even the home crowds in Brooklyn saw him as an object of reproach. During one game in Boston, the taunts and racial slurs seemed to reach a peak. To make matters worse Robinson committed an error and stood at second base humiliated while the fans hurled insults at him. Another Dodger, a Southern white man by the name Pee Wee Reese, called timeout. He walked from his position at shortstop toward Robinson at second base, and with the crowds looking on, he put his arm around Robinson's shoulder. The fans grew quiet. Robinson later said that arm around his shoulder saved his career. Brett Blair, www.Sermons.com I have a suspicion that Pee Wee Reese's friendship was offered with that act of love.

Next Saturday and Sunday we each have the opportunity to

attend the Grace and Reconciliation workshop with others in this community. I suppose those who really have been hurt and those who really did the hurting will not come, except in small numbers. But the scars created by these experiences, even if they were only unexpressed thoughts, do us great damage that we can only bypass by shoving them down, way down inside somewhere. But real healing and real reconciliation can only occur when we take them out, look at our behaviors for what they truly are and ask and give forgiveness. It takes risking something. We take risks when we sin. The risk has to be at least as large when we ask for or give forgiveness. There is no real life without risk.

It's all rather simple, and so complex that it challenges thought. Life, love, friendship, even enmity all come at a price. It is my hope that each of us will explore love and friendship with the next person we meet, and with each other next Saturday and Sunday. Some of us are new in this community, but how can even we become a part of the love we have found in this place without also sharing with this family's grief and pain? It is the will of God

for you, all of you, and for me. Love and friendship require it. *So
be it.*