

Precious Friends

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Bloor Street United Church
Sunday, May 17, 2009 – 6th of Easter

Reading:

Acts 10.44-48

While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word. The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles, for they heard them speaking in tongues and extolling God. Then Peter said, 'Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?' So he ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they invited him to stay for several days.

Psalm 98

O sing to the LORD a new song,
for he has done marvelous things.
His right hand and his holy arm
have gained him victory.
The LORD has made known his victory;
he has revealed his vindication in the sight of the nations.
He has remembered his steadfast love and faithfulness
to the house of Israel.
All the ends of the earth have seen
the victory of our God.

Make a joyful noise to the LORD, all the earth;
break forth into joyous song and sing praises.
Sing praises to the LORD with the lyre,
with the lyre and the sound of melody.
With trumpets and the sound of the horn
make a joyful noise before the King, the LORD.

Let the sea roar, and all that fills it;
the world and those who live in it.
Let the floods clap their hands;

let the hills sing together for joy
at the presence of the LORD, for he is coming
to judge the earth.
He will judge the world with righteousness,
and the peoples with equity.

John 15.9-17

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.

When we look around the pews this morning, we can see that some of our number are away for the holiday weekend. Perhaps they are at the lake, perhaps some will set out in a canoe like the one we see on the bulletin cover. These holiday weekends are so important to people - the need to chill, to stop hurrying, somehow to hit the pause button, and say okay, timeout. And even those who never go to a lake, and can't stand the thought of getting in a canoe, still need to find that soul-restoring moment, that holiday feeling. Holiday, holy day?

This is the holiday season in the church year. We are at day 36 of the fifty days of Eastertide, the 50 days from Easter to Pentecost, when the Christian community presses the pause button. We hear a variety of stories, a hodgepodge really – some from before Jesus' death and some from much later in the overall narrative. As someone said this week of the story that Robert read – why are we hearing the story of the Holy Spirit and the gentiles two weeks before Pentecost? It is a bit confusing in terms of narrative flow,

but the lectionary at this season just seems to circle back and around, to keep pointing back to the centre, to help us think, to help us reflect on our faith. We have a sense of luxury as we stop and wonder. Are we cared for as by a shepherd? Green pastures, quiet soul-restoring waters? What does it mean to be organically connected to the divine reality as a vine is connected to its root? To be tended and pruned, to abide in love?

And now today another image – *I am your friend*, says Jesus. Even more, *you are my friends*. And what would that mean? And how would that actually work?

It seems that what Jesus is saying to the disciples as they sit around the table - perhaps picking at the remains of the meal, and finishing off the wine - is that they should no longer just consider themselves followers of a great leader. Instead they are to realize that *they are* in the world just what Jesus has been. In his words, he has *told them everything*.

About three hundred years before this scene, Aristotle lectured his students about friendship. He distinguished the highest form of friendship from two others - simple pleasure, or usefulness. Genuine friendship outlasts pleasure or utility because the friends share a commitment to good. *Each alike wishes for the good of the other, for the sake of the good itself ... It is those who desire the good of the friend for the friend's sake that are most truly friends, because each loves the other for what he is, and not for any incidental quality.*

Aristotle wrote that a friend is like another self. And elsewhere – that friendship is a single soul living in two bodies. It is this organic connection that Jesus seems to want the disciples to capture. That even though they may lose him, they have him. It makes things more complicated, more demanding, if they are to be friends rather than servants. There is a lot more responsibility.

As we saw with the children, we do have a fairly concrete idea of what a friend is. Someone is interested in us, who cares about us for our own sake, and not because we will be of use to them. Sometimes this Gospel rendering of friendship seems odd to us – *you are my friends if you obey my commandments*. That is jarring – yet in a certain way we too obey one another's commandments: not in the sense of following orders, but in the sense of genuinely accepting the reality of the other. Taking the other as given, as real.

The commandment that Jesus is referring to is the commandment to love one another. He says, be connected to one another as I am connected to you, and as I am

connected to God. That is true friendship. Let my reality be the reality that defines you.

He is saying, you become me when you love one another. Let me pause right here, with a little story from the web:

A usually irate parishioner is said to have tackled the rector after church one Sunday morning. "I'm so glad you preached a historical sermon," she said. The rector, shocked and pleased by this unusual praise beamed thanks. The parishioner continued, "Yes, because I am sick and tired of hearing about love all the time."

Well, fair enough. This does happen in church a lot. When in doubt, call on love. In last week's reading, we heard *God is love*.

And we mean it in so many different ways. In lectionary group this week someone commented on the sheer strangeness of the claims we make as Christians. On the one hand, we regularly state and believe that God is Mystery, utterly beyond our words and our minds. Ineffable. Invisible. Beyond our capacity to grasp. Ground of our being. Somehow in and through everything. The great cosmic reality that we heard described in the Psalm – that which causes the sea to roar, the rivers to clap their hands and the hills to sing together for joy.

And at the same time, *we sing, what a friend we have in Jesus*. We talk to God, we tell our sorrows and frustrations, we ask for help and presence. For a job, for a relationship, for healing. We speak in such personal terms - so intimate, so non-cosmic. Odd that we hold together these two frankly incompatible notions of the nature of the divine reality.

Our notions of friendship and community in the church are similarly ambiguous. We hear these posed as alternatives – sometimes because someone wants to criticize someone else. Is the church about tight community, bound intimately together in love, as Jesus seems to imply here? Creating a special community with higher standards? Or is it about extending that love out and beyond? We see the conundrum played out in the reading from Acts. It is a comic little scene, just after Peter has had some strong hints about inclusiveness through a dream. As the Jewish Christians observe the group of gentiles, they are considering what the standards should be for membership in the new movement – circumcision, dietary rules. But then, it seems the Holy Spirit has just gone ahead and filled them up! You can picture Peter scratching his head, "I guess we better baptize them."

We struggle with it in simple programming terms too – focus, or just stretch out? In or out? Centripetal or centrifugal? Safety or adventure?

What Jesus says as shepherd, as vine, and as friend, is that in him the inward move and the outward move are held together. That it is love that encompasses both the smallest and the largest of our worlds. That love brings us deep safety, and compels us to adventure. The shepherd leads the sheep in to protect them and leads them out to find new meadows. The vine connects the vitality of the root with the beauty of flower and fruit. In our precious friends, we know both the intimacy of close relationship, and the generosity of new connection.

The friend that we have in Jesus is the one whose transforming love will send us out to love the world. Thanks be to God.