

## THE FRIENDSHIP OF CHRIST

Easter 6 Year B

Acts 10:44-48; Ps. 98; 1 Jn. 5:1-6; Jn. 15:9-17

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A Middle School English teacher asked her class one day to write imaginative definitions of a friend. One student said, "A friend is a pair of open arms in a society of armless people." Another said, "A friend is a warm bedroll on a cold and frosty night." Others said: "A friend is a lively polka in the midst of a dreary musical concert." (What? No rock on' roll?) "A friend is a mug of hot coffee on a damp, cloudy day." "A friend is a beautiful orchard in the middle of the desert." "A friend is a stiff drink when you've just had a terrible shock." (How does a middle schooler know that?) "A friend is a hot bath after you have walked 20 miles on a dusty road." Lovely thoughts. Mark Twain said, "The holy passion of friendship is of so sweet and steady and loyal and enduring a nature that it will last through a whole lifetime if not asked to lend money!" Friendship... Friendship is clearly a wonderful thing.

But it would also seem to be a rare thing. A recent survey in America discovered some 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 reading from John's gospel this morning talks about friends and friendship. Jesus 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."

If you were to write about some of the characteristics of a good friendship, you might make some comments like these:

Friends care about each other's welfare. That makes sense. If you are my friend, I want the best for you. I want people to think well of you. I want no harm to come to you. In fact, deep friendships are often forged in the midst of common suffering. In previous years I have been involved in ANZAC services. It's interesting to note the kinds of things that returned servicemen and women talk about. While they might speak of the ugliness of war, they will talk more, and far more freely, about the kinds of friends that they made.

Sharing is another thing friends do. Material things, of course. Even money, despite Mark Twain's humorous warning. And more important, friends share what is inside. C. S. Lewis says, "Friendship is born at that moment when one person says to another, "What! You, too? I thought I was the only one."

There's a story of an old African-American woman who had spent some seventy years as a servant to a southern belle from childhood into her dotage. Now the mistress had died, and in an effort to comfort this old black maid, a neighbour said, "I'm so sorry to hear of Aunt Lucy's death. You must miss her greatly. I know you were dear, dear friends."

"Yes'm," said the servant, "I am sorry she died. But we wasn't friends." (You'll have to excuse my accent.)

"Not friends," said the lady, "I know you were. I've seen you laughing and talking together lots of times."

"Yes'm, that's so," came the reply. "We've laughed together, and we've talked together, but we was just 'qaintances. You see, Miss Ruth, we ain't never shed no tears. Folks got to cry together before they is friends."

What else makes for friendship? According to Jesus, expectations are involved. "You are my friends if you do what I command you...And I appointed you to go and bear fruit..." Have you ever been let down by a friend? Probably. Has your disappointment at being let down—or the other person's disappointment at being let down by you—ever strained or even broken the relationship? Happens all the time, doesn't it? Friendships are sustained when friends keep up their end of the bargain.

There's an illustration that describes the transient nature of friendship. Two hikers were walking through the woods when they suddenly confronted a giant bear. Immediately, one of the men took off his boots, pulled out a pair of track shoes and began putting them on. "What are you doing?" cried his companion. "We can't outrun that bear, even with jogging shoes." "Who cares about the bear?" the first hiker replied. "All I have to worry about is outrunning you." (Jim Whitehead, quoted by Seymour Rosenberg in Spartanburg, S.C., Herald)

*True* friendship often requires sacrifice of some sort, and, in some rare cases, even the supreme sacrifice. "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends."

During the Vietnam War, a rural village had been bombarded with mortar shells and some shells landed on an orphanage run by missionaries. The missionaries and a few children were killed outright. Several other children were wounded, including an 8-year-old girl who had multiple injuries and was bleeding profusely.

In response to a runner sent to a near-by town, a young Navy doctor and nurse came with only their medical kits. The young girl was in critical condition and in need of an immediate blood transfusion. Blood typing indicated that neither American had the right blood. However, several of the uninjured children did.

The Navy doctor spoke some pidgin Vietnamese and the nurse some high school French. The children spoke no English, but some French. Using what language they had and sign language, they tried to explain to the frightened children that unless they could replace some of the girl's blood, she was going to die. They asked if anyone would be willing to give blood to help. Wide-eyed silence met their request. After several moments of eye-searching, a little hand went slowly up, dropped down, then went up again.

"Oh, thank you!" exclaimed the nurse in French, "What is your name?"

"Heng," came the reply.

Heng was quickly laid on a pallet, his arm swabbed with alcohol, the needle carefully inserted in his vein. After a moment he shuddered, covering his face with his free hand.

"Is it hurting, Heng?" asked the doctor. Heng shook his head no, but he kept sobbing, his eyes tightly closed, his fist in his mouth to stifle his sobs. Something was very wrong. Just then a Vietnamese nurse arrived to help. Seeing Heng's distress, she spoke to him in Vietnamese, listened to him, quickly answered him, stroking his forehead, soothing and reassuring him. After a few moments, Heng stopped crying, opened his eyes, and a look of relief spread over his face. Looking up, the Vietnamese nurse explained to the Americans, "Heng thought he was dying. He misunderstood you. He thought you asked him to give *all* his blood to save the little girl."

"But why should he be willing to do that?" asked the Navy nurse.

The Vietnamese nurse repeated the question to Heng, who answered simply, "Because she is my friend."

Have you ever had a friend like that? Well, you've had at least one that I know of. It was on a hill called Calvary, outside the city wall, overlooking the town dump. It was there that your friend and my friend died that we might live. "No one has greater love than this, than to lay down one's life for one's friends."

We are invited into a relationship with God where we are no longer slave and master—we are friends. And in our gospel reading this morning, Jesus told us how we might become his friends. "You are my friends if you do what I command you." But even as simple a statement as that could lead some to misunderstand if we take it out of context. Friendship with Jesus is not simply about following some rules, as that sentence might lead us to believe. Remember what the command is: "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you." In other words, if you want to be my friend, be a friend to others. That sounds so simple. But we know it's not.

No matter how difficult that may be sometimes, loving one another is not an optional extra—it's a command of God. It's nice to get thanks or appreciation, but in the end,

whether we get it or not, our motivation to love one another—to be a true friend to others—is that it is a command of God. And we do it willingly, because God first loved us.

When I was a kid in primary school, periodically in sport we would have to line up. Two of the best players would be chosen to be captains of opposing teams. It was their job, then to choose those who they wanted on their teams. Guess who was always the last or second last to be chosen. Yes, that's right—me. Pretty humiliating stuff, isn't it. It's not fun being the last one to be chosen.

If Jesus wanted to win in the religion game, he should have chosen the Pharisees. They were the pious people. They were the ones who prayed at least three times a day. They knew their Bibles. They worked hard at obeying *all* of God's laws. They fasted once or twice a week to show their religious devotion.

But whom did Jesus choose? Not the Pharisees. He chose fishermen—known to be crude and foul-mouthed, impatient and hot-headed. He chose a tax collector, of dubious character. He chose a zealot—a fanatical revolutionary, and one who wanted all the tax collectors dead. It must have made for some interesting dinner conversation. And Jesus chose us—known sinners, known to be somewhat less than perfect—known to have all kinds of problems in our lives. God elects the rejects.

Friendship. Recalling those definitions with which we began all this, we can add Charlie Brown's inimitable insight. Standing all alone, Charlie says, "A friend is someone who sticks up for you when you are not there." It's a little bit like a eulogy. I've conducted a number of funerals over the years. At most, the love that there is for the person who has passed away is very evident. What is especially significant for me is the passion and sincerity with which those who speak, honour the person's life in the eulogy. However, I remember several years ago conducting another funeral, also memorable, but for other reasons. While there was certainly love for the person who had passed away, what was sad to me, was that there was no-one who was willing to speak on behalf of that person—there was no eulogy—no-one to say those last public words of honour and farewell. It's not an easy thing to do, I know, but somehow, it seems to me, it is important to declare those enduring words of friendship.

I think that there is no funeral so joyful and so fulfilling than those where the person who has died is remembered for his or her commitment to Christ and the declaration by others of how that person lived their life in the relationship of friend to Jesus.

How would you like to be remembered.

To Christ our Saviour, be all glory, honour and praise. Amen.