

St. Paul's Congregational Church,
May 7, 2018; Easter 6B
John 15: 9:17
"You are My Friends"
Rev. Cynthia F. Reynolds

Let us pray: may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

These past few weeks I've been spending time wrapping up the settlement of my Dad's estate – lots of paperwork, details, reviewing accountings for Probate Court: it's been an 18 month process – and now it's almost complete. Mixed in with these last responsibilities of being executor of his estate, I've also been reflecting and remembering – remembering him, the good times, memories of family gatherings, his huge and productive garden, the beautiful dahlias that would stop traffic going by the house – and there were the hard times as well. I've been remembering going home to Farmington – and how it was so like going through a time warp back to my younger days. And then the sale of that childhood home has brought its own set of emotions.

All this is part of the fun as well as the bittersweetness of going home, isn't it – to drive down old familiar streets and remember good times there. A few years ago I spent a few days there getting the house ready for dad to come home after a time in a nursing home/rehab center when something relatively minor went wrong with my car – it needed to be looked at before I came back here to New Jersey. So I called the mechanic who had taken care of Reynolds' cars for probably 30 years – the number even came into my consciousness...can you believe that? He said he could absolutely take care of it – bring the car over. Well, on the way there I went by my old college – how it's grown – and spent time looking around old familiar haunts from my college days. Seems like it was more recent than it was for sure – but what a trip down memory lane. He fixed the car as we chatted about my dad – and reminisced a bit – when I pulled out my checkbook and asked what do I owe you – he said, "Nothing! Just give my best to your dad – we go way back!"

Dad was chief of the local fire department for 20 years – he'd maintained contact with the department – now he was the senior member. Well, when I got home there were 5 firemen there to help my brother and me move furniture and do the heavy lifting involved in getting the house ready for Dad to come home. None of them had worked with him – some of their

dads had - but here they were, available to help when one of their members needed it. They made that heavy work look easy – and when they left, they told us, any time you need anything, we’ll be here! Just call – we take care of our own.

Old friends – or as I like to call them, friends of long standing are so special, aren’t they.

As I’ve reflected on those events, I come right back to this passage from John: “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.” And this: “I do not call you servants any longer...but I have called you friends.”

Doesn’t this invite us to reflect on the friendships we have with others – and more to the point, our friendship with God.

Jesus lifts up several characteristics of friendship in this passage: first, it’s a voluntary relationship. Of course there’s a matter of luck involved in who we meet but friendship develops when one person meets another and then comes to see that the offer of friendship is returned. We worry about our children picking good friends, don’t we – and true friendships are a real treasure. But listen to what Jesus says: “you did not choose me but I chose you.” God chose to invite us to be friends – God could have any kind of relationship with us – parent to child, master to slave, ruler to subject – but God chooses the relationship of friend. God always takes the initiative, but in friendship, the choice has to be returned. Jesus chooses his disciples – but the disciples must decide whether to choose him in return. To share his dreams and way of life. Jesus offer of friendship is always there in front of us – how do we respond? Not just in the hard times but also in the good times.

Friendship also involves mutual sharing. We sing, “What a friend we have in Jesus, all our sins and griefs to bear.” One of the most wonderful things about friends is that we can be ourselves together. True friendship doesn’t change with time does it – don’t you have good friends you may not see often, but when you’re together, it’s like there has been no distance in time or space. An old (long standing) high school friend and I rarely see each other but when we do, we pick right up. And so it is with God. Like the Prodigal Son, God always, always welcomes us back. The invitation is still there – that never changes.

And friends talk freely together – there’s an intimacy that develops between friends – and we are privileged to speak with God on the most intimate terms – about those things God wants us to do – and about those things we would ask God for. We know that God will listen to everything – about all those things that excite us and all those things that disturb us.

A writer tells the story about an American Negro woman in the pre civil war times in the Southern USA:

A woman in Charleston met this lady who was a servant of a neighbor who died.

“I’m sorry to hear of your Aunt Lucy’s death,” she said. “You must miss her greatly. You were such friends.”

“Yes’ m,” said the servant. “I’m sorry she died – but we weren’t friends.”

“Why, I thought 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’re just ‘quaintances. You see, Miss Ruth, we ain’t never share any tears. Folks got to cry together before they’re friends.”

Now, isn’t that true.

God invites us to “take it to the Lord in prayer.” The amazing thing is that God also shares with us. We are God’s friends when we share ourselves and when we listen to what God is saying to us. Prayer is about talking but honestly, it’s mostly about listening. What is it that God is telling you?

Another thing: friendship doesn’t exist for itself only – friends produce or do things together. Jesus puts a condition on friendship – “you are my friends if you do what I command you.” He says, “I appointed you to go and bear fruit...fruit that will last. I am giving you these commands so you can love one another.” It’s not about only how much we love Jesus – it is about how much we love the other people Jesus loves. Friendship with God and with each other means we become friends who love justice, who work together to make things right, who love not just each other but the world. That can be a tougher one, can’t it.

A pastor tells this story:

One man went to his pastor one day to say that he felt there was a lack of friendliness among members of the congregation and that people were reluctant to greet one another in church. The pastor agreed with him and said that he had devised a plan to change things.

During the worship the next Sunday, the pastor described the situation to the congregation and said that the following Sunday they would have a brief pause to allow parishioners to turn to those seated behind them and greet them with a friendly hello. After the service, the same man turned around to the woman behind him and said, “Good morning.” She looked at him in shocked indignation. She snapped, “That doesn’t start until next Sunday!”

The truth is, some people just aren't ready to be friends of either God or us – but regardless of their choice, we're called to be friends to them, to choose to act in love not only toward those who love us but to outcasts, to people we've never met, to anonymous drivers on the road, to little children who are lost, to aged people who need help to take care of themselves, and of course to our neighbors in the pews, no matter how grumpy he or she may be.

God has chosen us to be friends – despite the fact that you – and I – at the first did not choose God.

Finally, friendship is an open relationship – friendship is never exclusive between two people. Good friends say, “Any friend of yours is a friend of mine.” In John's gospel, Jesus' friends are never just the 12 disciples. There is always a larger circle of followers who knew Jesus and who came after them. We can rejoice that God has other friends whom we may never know. Our circle is ever growing – our friendship with God is what connects us, what we have in common.

Remember: Jesus tells his disciples, tells us, in today's reading: I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full.”

We are Jesus' friends – chosen by him and called to bear fruit, fruit that will last, fruit that will please God. That day in Farmington I had a glimpse of that joy – when I met that mechanic and when those firemen appeared at my dad's house. Surely the fruit of those friends pleased God – and I certainly felt a lightness of spirit, knowing there were people who would drop everything to ease the burden of another. My circle of friends expanded – and I rejoice and am so glad for that.

So as you go forth today, go knowing that Christ has chosen you, that Christ finds you worthwhile – that he values you – that he thinks you are important, that he wants you for his friend. And rejoice in it! Take the joy in it that Christ wants you to have!

And as you go, go resolved to make friends of others, no matter who they are or what they are about, or what they have or have not done. For that is what it means to have been appointed by Christ to be fruitful. Let us choose, as he commands us, to be friends to others: love one another.

Amen.

Let us pray: Lord Jesus, loving God, we give you thanks today for choosing us to be your friends – for reaching and embracing us and supporting us and helping us – even when we have not been ready or willing to reach out and embrace and help you. So often, Lord, we forget that you are so much more than our Creator, so much more than our guiding light –

you know how we turn away from you at the very time we need you most, how we seek comfort in those things which do not satisfy. Yet you accompany us and reach out to us even in those times. Truly Lord, you are a friend to us. Help us to be a friend to you. Lord, hear our prayer. Amen.