

THE RHYTHM OF LIFE

A Life of Friendship

A prompting offered by Rev. Dr. Michael D. Castle
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Cross Creek Community Church, United Church of Christ
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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.

John 15: 9-17

[Jesus said:] "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."

"...I have called you friends."

John 15:15

It is amazing to me how many people still focus on right belief, or doctrine, or dogma, as the essence of what it means to be a Christian. This past week I made my annual trek to Oakwood High School to teach three sections of their senior's comparative religion class. These students are always delightful and quite savvy when it comes to matters of religion, but I am always amazed at how many questions I get about "belief." Dr. Castle, do you believe in the virgin birth? Do you believe in hell? What are your beliefs about abortion, stem cell research, the death penalty? On and on it goes... Maybe this is what a comparative religion class should be doing, but unfortunately, it also sounds like what most Christians do to define their faith: It is about right belief about God, Jesus and the Bible. And for some, Christian faith can be boiled down to a litmus test of right belief about homosexuality or abortion...at least that is the way it has been presented in the past few decades. And if the belief that is being professed is iffy or questionable, then the common response is, "You just got to have faith!" which translated means, there is no room for doubt or difference.

It has been my experience that a focus on right belief and doctrinal correctness has a way of shutting us down, rather than opening us up, as Christian people. It has been my experience that a focus on certainty tends to divide us and separate us rather than build us up in lively and meaningful community. Just look at how many denominations and independent churches there are in America...all sign and symbol that we have not done well with our differences and that our rigidity in belief has indeed divided us. And top of all of that it can make Christianity seem so complex and confusing that we miss the simplicity at the heart of the Christian message.

When all has been said and done, when every subtle thing has been dissected and analyzed, Jesus' Gospel message of love comes to us as incredibly simple and hugely subversive to rigid, dogmatic belief. And what I find more compelling as a Christian is not right beliefs and doctrinal uniformity, but ultimately—the way of love. It is love that gives our faith in God – grounded in the life of Jesus – meaning and purpose and mission. It is love that draws us to worship and a desire for deepen spiritual connection. It is love that connects us to the rhythm of life. Soren Kirkegaard said it beautifully: "It is not where we breathe, but where we love, that we live."

But how does love get lived? It's all well and good to discuss it, even theologize about it, but how it is lived in your life, in mine, in the heart of our community? This is an incredibly tall order and John lays the message upon us in some very thick, even obtuse, ways: "Keep my commandments"; "No one has loved you as much as I love you"; "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends." If we didn't know better, we could think that Jesus was trying to lay a huge guilt trip on us, or at least a heavy burden!

But how does love get lived out in the life of community? As Christians who live out their faith in the free church tradition (think Congregationalists and yes, even Baptists!), we are given the call to what we understand as "the priesthood of all believers"; which means that we are expected to use our lives to reveal the grace of God working through us. Carlye Marney called it being "Priests to one another." And this is a huge demand, to literally "be a sacrament"; to be the means by which God is experienced and known; but it helps to remember the part of John's Gospel which says, "You did not choose me, I chose you." In other words, when everything comes down to it, it's not about my or your determination to love or be loved, it's about the grace and love that has already come to abide in us.

It's relatively easy to choose the ones we would love. We choose our friends and our life partners, we choose the church and clubs we want to belong to and we make friends according to whom we like and how we get along. It's more difficult to love those we don't choose. Sometimes this can happen within extended families. Uncle Jack or Cousin Vickie may drive us up the wall and back down again. Even our parents, or our children, can drive us crazy! It can also happen in church and in communities too, despite our declarations of universal acceptance and love.

These words have incredible power: "You did not choose me, I chose you." As we build our relationships with each other, within the congregation, and without, we can remember that we are not here together because we think it's a nice idea to get together every week. We are here with each other because it is the call of God for the strength, courage and vitality of our very lives.

The life of Jesus modeled this odd vision. He ate with tax collectors and prostitutes, condemned the rich, called the poor blessed, criticized the powerful and praised the confessions of common folk. He mingled with foreigners and told stories about those who were far off; he embraced children, decried piety and noticed tiny acts of sacrifice in the name of friendship. Jesus constantly pressed at the margins for justice and welcomed those who were different from him precisely because they were useless to others and were cast off from normal society. And he added to all this by saying, "You didn't choose me, I chose you!" In other words, the Gospel calls us to go to the margins of our own spirits to discover what love is all about! We are not called to love where it is simple, acceptable and easy—in the heart of our own heart. We are called to go to the places where love is complex, difficult and even a little messy.

In a time when tolerance passes for charity and love is being legislated everywhere, whether in churches, in states, or by governmental entities, we, as followers of Jesus, are called out to the places where it is uncomfortable and unpopular. It is right here – in church – that we are called discover true mutuality and genuine love. And in a community where love is central, our call goes beyond tolerance and reaches toward genuine respect and acceptance. When love is central, our behavior toward each other must move us toward a more inclusive embrace and mutuality. Does that mean we can have a church of republicans and democrats, of conservatives and liberals, of multiple races, ethnicities, and sexual orientations? I sure hope so. Not because it is politically correct, but because love is central!

In John's Gospel, some rather remarkable words spring from the mouth of Jesus, "You are my friends, if you do what I command you. I call you servants no longer; a servant does not know what the master is about. I call you friends, because I have disclosed to you everything I have heard." You are my friends. Not you are my servants. Not you are my followers, or flock, or even disciples, but *friends*. It's a gutsy thing for someone to say. It might have worked a little better if Jesus had said you are my followers, or you are my heirs, or you are my co-workers, or you are my colleagues. But he keeps it radically simple and shapes the nature of church forever in that stroke of genius – *You are my friends*.

It's an odd pronouncement really. Has anyone ever said to you, "You are my friend"? Our 6-year old son has been known to say of late, "Papa, you are not my friend anymore!" To which I reply, "That's right, I'm not your friend, I'm your papa, so we better figure out how we're going to love each other."

Most of the time we take our friendships for granted, don't we? Whereas with family members or our partners, we might throw in an occasional "I love you" or "thanks for everything you do," it is not too often that we walk up to someone and simply pronounce ourselves their friend. It is easier to relate to blood—

at least you know you have to deal with them the rest of your life. It also can be easier to relate to your partner or spouse— at least there is that pledge of love, a covenant, and perhaps the memory of falling in love, to help you out. But friendship is different. Friendship, authentic friendship, can be very elusive for many of us.

A recent study of the life cycles of American men showed that friendship was largely noticeable by its absence! Another study states that it is very difficult for men and women to develop close friendships without discovering a vast amount of projection from society. It is very difficult for men and women, especially married or living in committed relationships, to form lasting friendships with each other. Now, women tend to fare better when it comes to friendship; the same study states that women, on the average, report loving their best friends nearly as much as they do their lovers. But the meaning of true friendship remains culturally elusive— "It's nothing serious, they are just friends." "She has a lot of acquaintances, but no real friends." "I know him, but I'd never share anything very important with him." So what was Jesus trying to say when he called us friends and then said, "If you do what I command you"?

At first, it sounds like the offer of friendship, but with lots of strings attached. It is intimidating and a bit of a turn-off to enter into this new relationship. But the "strings" are simply stated, with no apparent hidden agenda— *"This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you."*

In the friendship circle of Jesus, there are no limits on love. In calling us friends, Jesus performed a subversive act; for he set us free from dominance and submission in our spiritual relationship to God, or to Jesus, and then he calls us to move from isolation and alienation into new human relationships based on freedom, equality, and caring: *"Love one another, as I have loved you."*

As Sallie McFague asserts in her book *Models for God*, the basis of friendship is freedom, and that is part of its power; all other relationships are ringed with duty, utility, or desire. In the freedom of friendship, a bond can be created between friends that is one of the strongest bonds between human beings, and that is the bond of trust. Whatever else one receives from a friend, one of the chief gifts of the friendship is trust, loyalty, reliability. A true friend is sincere, genuine, true, and honest and does not open the door to deceit or betrayal.

Think about one of your friends for a moment. Isn't the quality you appreciate most about them their ability to be present for you? And in that presence is not trust created—going both ways?

And there is a mysterious quality that makes a truly loving church unique as a caring community. It is the presence of trusting, abiding friendship. Most people, when they decide to unite with a church, are drawn to it because friendship is offered. (Which by the way is different from friendliness! Friendliness is important, don't get me wrong, and is perhaps a sign of the potential friendship that is possible, but friendship – a relationship of trust and care – is crucial!) We often have a hidden hope of finding a family within a church, a companionship with people who really care, a friendship with those who know how to give and receive trust. Studies show that friendship counts more as a reason for joining a church than anything else—more than worship, activities, the music, or preaching.

The Greek word is *koinonia*; it means fellowship, communion, or sharing. The divine dimension of *koinonia* is the fellowship or communion of the Holy Spirit. *Koinonia* is what it means to develop friendship in the context of the Christian community. It is the unique gift of believers in the midst of community—friendship based on the love and ethic of Jesus Christ.

The friendship the church has to offer is unlike that in any other place. It is extraordinarily inclusive. "You are my friend," said Jesus. He didn't say, "You, the virtuous"; or "You, who are respectable"; or "You, who have good jobs"; or "You, who can pay all your bills." Jesus simply looked at humanity and said, "You, all of you are my friends. I give you to one another. Now go, and be friends with each other in my name."

And that's how it happens in a lively, open, freedom-seeking church. We make friends with people we might not have known otherwise. And we make friends with people we wouldn't choose to talk to—even in the grocery store line! We even are called to make friends with people we don't particularly like. But we're called into a relationship of trust with them nonetheless. This is part of the unique nature of the church as a kinship of people who are called together, in friendship, by the grace of Jesus Christ and the love of God.

A final aspect of friendship, although this is more rare than common, is the ability to share a common vision – and this is where Cross Creek excels. C. S. Lewis puts it this way: "Lovers are normally face to face, absorbed in each other; friends are side by side, absorbed in some common interest." Emerson expressed it this way: "Do you see the same truth?" Such friendship no longer is delight in each other, but is now delight together in something, a vision or project which unites the friends. The richest and most rewarding friendships I have been blessed to have are the ones in which a common vision was noticed, nurtured, and mutually created and sustained. It is this quality of friendship that Jesus was addressing when he said, "Greater love hath no one than this, that we lay down our lives for our friends." Examples of those willing to give up their lives for their friends and the causes to which they are devoted are many: Martin Luther King, Jr.; Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German theologian in Nazi Germany; Mother Teresa, the Roman Catholic nun living among the lepers in India; Harvey Milk, the gay man from San Francisco who was one of the first public leaders in the fight for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender justice and equality. We are not without examples of those who are willing to go the whole way for those they love and for the common vision of a better day for their people.

But a text like John's can be frustrating to us because we are ordinary people living in a strange time when this kind of faith and friendship may not be required of us. But the text carries within it the central message of the our faith; we do not live unto ourselves alone—ever! We must always be willing to put ourselves aside for those we are asked to care for, whether it be bringing a casserole to the sick person up the street or writing a letter to our congressperson/legislator, or praying for someone who is ill.

The call of Jesus is so alarmingly simple, we might miss it if we aren't careful. You are my friends. This means we must be willing to live in relationship with each other, not in isolation from each other. The life that we have chosen is the life of the Spirit that Jesus lived, a life full of love and without fear. His was a life where friendships mattered, so much that he built his ministry on those who were his friends.

Did you pay attention to the words of welcome that we offered our new covenant members today? We said: "We promise you our friendship..," It is strange how certain things stick out when you pick up a certain theme or work from a certain biblical text on a given day. I am even wondering if I should change the words of blessing I say to each new covenant member: "We welcome you and affirm your baptism: A child of God, a "friend" (as opposed to "disciple") of Jesus, empowered by God's spirit?" You'll have to let me know what you think about that change on your way out today!

Jesus lived an amazing life—one of sacrifice and love, with compassion and profound kindness. Can you see him healing crazy people, healing hurting children, healing blind men, and healing women who are crippled? Can you see him confronting authorities and standing his ground when falsely accused? Can you see him with his friends, tolerating their weaknesses and upholding their strengths? And Jesus chose to live for those he loved. He chose to give up himself for his friends. He knew how to be a friend. He trusted his friends. He knew just how costly friendship can be. And all of this is so very crucial to the rhythm of life to which we are called to dance: a life of *friendship*.