

Psalm 98  
John 15:9-17

Sixth Sunday of Easter  
Midway Presbyterian Church  
Communion, May 6, 2018

## **I Have Called you Friends**

### *Introduction to the Psalm*

In our Psalm for this Sixth Sunday of Easter, we hear it declared that all the ends of the earth have seen the rescue of Israel from evil. All the ends of the earth have seen God's salvation. So it's only fitting to sing a new song of joy. Creation itself is invited to join in this exuberant hymn. Listen to these words from Psalm 98...

### *Introduction to the Gospel Lesson*

In our Gospel Lesson today from John 15, we find a continuation of last Sunday's allegory of the vine which focused on the vital connection of the branches to the vine—of disciples to Christ. And thus the call for us to abide in Christ. Today we hear Jesus teach that we are chosen to bear fruit and that we are to understand ourselves to be friends of Jesus. Such friendship involves a call to faithful service and to loving one another. Listen to these words from John 15:9-17...

### *Sermon*

In our Gospel Lesson today Jesus declares,

“I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you,  
and that your joy may be complete.” (v. 11)

We would do well to take to heart these words of our Lord, because Jesus' instruction about the vine and the branches is for us to know his joy and that our joy may be complete. Do we only think of discipleship as entering his way of life through a narrow gate and walking a straight path? In his commentary on John, William Barclay says that a gloomy Christian is a

contradiction in terms, and nothing in all religious history has done more harm than its connection with black clothes and long faces.

So what does Christ mean when he says we are his friends? Formerly the relationship between Christ and his disciples has been that of master and servant. But it is now transformed into that service which is perfect freedom, for the disciples are taken into their Master's confidence as *friends*, to hear all that he has heard from the Father.

It is said that among the marks of a true friend is one who

...guards you when you are off your guard and does not forsake you in trouble; he even lays down his life for your sake; he restrains you from doing wrong; he enjoins you to do right; he reveals to you the way of heaven. (The Buddha)

Shakespeare said,

A friend should bear a friend's infirmities,  
But Brutus makes mine greater than they are.  
(Cassius in *Julius Caesar*)

And Aristotle said,

We need friends when we are young to keep us from error, when we get old to tend upon us and carry out those plans which we have not strength to execute ourselves, and in the prime of life to help us in noble deeds—"two together," [as Homer says] for thus we are more efficient in thought and in action. (*Nicomachean Ethics*, Book 8)

Then Jesus instructs us that we are to love one another, as he has loved us. The Greek word here for love is *agape*. As most of us have heard, and heard more than once, *agape* is a self-giving love, a love that seeks the best for the other. The word came into Latin as *caritas* and then into English as *charity*—but the gradual shift of the word to mean "philanthropy" brings us back to love as the best translation.

Paul employed the word *agape* when he wrote his First Letter to the Church in Corinth:

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. (1 Cor. 13:4-7)

It's been said that this *agape* love is God's by nature, and ours by grace. It is this love that binds the relationship of Christ the Son with God the Father. Christ has demonstrated this love for us in his life, and in his death on the cross. And he calls us to love one another with that same love which he has for us.

“Greater love has no man than this,  
that he lay down his life for his friends.” (Jn. 9:13)

Jesus will practice what he preaches. He will lay down his life for us, even through the suffering and humiliation of the cross. John tells us that on the night before his death, there in the Upper Room, Jesus called his disciples friends.

Where do we see this love in our world today? Where do we see it in human experience shaped into literature? Surely it was there in the knights of King Arthur, standing over their fallen comrades in battle and taking deadly blows in their stead. But it was also there in Afghanistan in 2010 when U.S. Marine Lance Corporal Kyle Carpenter threw himself upon a grenade, risking his life to save a fellow Marine. Taking most of the damage himself, he lost his right eye and most of his teeth. His jaw and right arm were shattered. He spent five weeks in a coma, underwent dozens of surgeries and spent two years in the hospital for rehabilitation. Later he was awarded the Medal of Honor for his actions. Lance Corporal Carpenter was willing to die for his friend.

Our friends can include our brothers and sisters. The bond between siblings is strong and unless you have one, it's hard to explain the intense urge you feel to protect your kin. Ryan

Arnold had that urge when his brother Chad desperately needed a liver transplant. Without thinking, Ryan immediately checked to see if he was a compatible donor. Discovering that he was, the transplant went ahead. As with all surgeries, there was risk, and in fact, Ryan lost his life during the procedure. He'd made the ultimate sacrifice to ensure that his brother could live.

Greater love has no man than this,  
that he lay down his life for his friends. (v. 13)

Friendship also involves an opening of one's heart and mind to another.

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. (v. 15)

Jesus reveals to us the things he has learned from his Father. He doesn't just keep them to himself. Things concerning life and death, sin and forgiveness, faith, hope, and love, a home prepared for us in heaven, where to find a peace beyond understanding, how to bear fruit that will abide. How bleak life would be had he not shared all these things and more with us.

In a true friendship there is a trust in the other that exhibits confidence, and loyalty is not doubted. Something more than an obedient servant is seen here. Something warmer and more willing, more spontaneous.

Jesus displays his friendship in his confidence in us.

You did not choose me, but I chose you. And I appointed  
you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last. (v. 16a)

We did not find Christ and thereby find a new life. He found us. And he chose to provide us joy in him—a joy that begins now and lasts for all eternity. Despite all our failures and shortcomings, Christ has chosen us as his own. Just ordinary people, he transforms us into faithful disciples. And he calls us friends. The apostle Paul would say, “For me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.” (Phil. 1:21)

Joseph Scriven was an Irishman, born in 1886 near Banbridge, County Down, and a graduate of Trinity College in Dublin. At the age of 25 he suffered a terrible loss. The girl to whom he was engaged was accidentally drowned shortly before their wedding day. Overcome by grief, the young man decided to immigrate to Canada, where he settled in the province of Ontario and became a teacher. He devoted his spare time to evangelism and to helping the poor and infirm. He was a member of the Church of the Brethren.

Scriven was certainly a man who knew the meaning of trouble; and it was to console his mother in Ireland who was seriously ill, that he wrote the hymn, "What a Friend We Have in Jesus." We'll sing it shortly.

What a friend we have in Jesus  
 All our sins and griefs to bear  
 And what a privilege to carry  
 Everything to God in prayer. (v. 1)

We are told that it was the custom of the Roman emperors and the eastern kings for there to be in their courts a group of men called *the friends of the emperor*, or *the friends of the king*. In fact, the emperor or the king would talk to these people before he talked to his generals, his rulers, and his statesmen.

Jesus calls us friends. We always have access to him. His invitation to come unto him is always open to us. Just think of it: we are friends of the King of kings. Friends of one who was there at creation. Friends of our Lord and Savior. Friends of the Good Shepherd. But friendship with Jesus does not signify membership in some privileged club. Rather, it is a call to service and loving faithfulness. To love one another as he loves us.

My friends, be glad and rejoice. For we can live in daily fellowship with Christ. As we celebrate Holy Communion, let us remember that we are not like servants who merely do the bidding of a master. We are not like strangers in a foreign land. Jesus calls us friends. Those for whom he will ever be a friend in need...a friend indeed!

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.