

Friends

A Sermon by Louise Westfall
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Cleveland Heights, Ohio

17 May 2009

Text: John 15:9-17

Life is a continual ebb and flow, a river of turnings and deep, quiet spaces and noisy clattering over rocks. Always there is the constant disruption of endings and beginnings, hellos and farewells. Babies are born and grow up almost overnight; couples unite. . . and break apart; beloved patriarchs and matriarchs preside at the holiday dinner table. . . and fade away in death. We share our time with people—sometimes by choice, sometimes by chance--- simply the ones whose paths intersect with ours. We become friends and family, and together we ride that wild river of laughter and tears, hopes and disappointments.

This week I say goodbye to you for three months and head out on sabbatical. After thirty years of ministry, I'm looking forward to getting off the river for awhile. I want to rest in the grace of God's good world and be renewed. I am keenly aware of what a great privilege it is to have this time for big-picture reflection—to consider different ways of "being church" apart from the every day business of "doing church." I hope you also will see it as an investment in our ministry together.

But I will miss you. And like every farewell---even for a relatively short time—there's a certain amount of "separation anxiety." Of course I leave you in the very capable hands of Eric, Missy, and Dick. I have no doubt about their caring and creativity to carry on this ministry. It's just that the river flows ever forward, whether you're on it or not. When we come together again in August, it will be downstream from here. There will have been changes: big ones like births and baptisms and marriages and deaths, but also subtler ones like new insights, bursts of inspiration, shifts in perception, ideas hatched and plans dispatched. The river flows.

Yet change is not the only constant. There is something else, a truth beyond change, one still point in the turning world. Jesus held it up before his disciples just as he was preparing them for his own departure. John's gospel describes a farewell scene, the last supper, on the night Jesus is betrayed and arrested. He gathers with his disciples to celebrate the Passover meal. A certain poignancy settles over the scene as he tells them plainly he is going away. Again and again he reminds them to love one another. During dinner he does a remarkable thing—he washes their feet, a task not of master, but servant. And then he gives them an even more astonishing gift, one that will sustain them in his absence, one that will last through every change and for all time. Listen for God's Word to the church in the reading from the gospel according to John, in the fifteenth chapter at the ninth verse. [JOHN 15:9-17]

Friends. The unconditional love of another is one of life's greatest gifts. We are born into families and have no say about who our relatives are. We form families through marriage or partnership, and if we are very fortunate, those persons become our best friends. But whether partnered or single, male or female, at every age, true friendship is a gift without parallel.

And rare, I would add. I'm troubled by evidence that friendship—like so many other values—has become commodified. There are "friends with benefits" and friends in high places that reduce it to a transaction—I'll scratch your back if you scratch mine. The mobility of our society and the frantic pace of busy lives also make it more difficult to form and sustain friendships. But those realities have not decreased the human need for connection, for empathy and support. At the dawn of creation God said *It is not good for the people to be alone*. Woven into our basic identity is the instinct for kinship formation—originally key to physical survival, forming social bonds is still an essential ingredient to mental and emotional health. Human community has evolved only in how it is formed, not in its necessity for the good life. Not surprisingly

then, the Internet has created new ways of friendship formation through virtual connection.

Part of the study component of my sabbatical involves exploration of social networking and its potential for community building in the church. But I didn't actually wait for my sabbatical. One night this week I was at home working on this sermon and as sometimes happens had hit the wall. Nothing seemed to be working, so I sent a plea to my Facebook contacts to name the qualities they most valued in a friend. I was deluged with responses! Loyalty, honesty, trustworthiness were included. Help when you need it. Willingness to listen. "Friendship is born of shared experience," wrote one man. Almost everyone spoke of the unconditional love of a true friend: "Someone who knows your best and worst traits and accepts you in spite of it all." You get the feeling these people know what they're talking about. It occurred to me that this cyber-interaction reflected a certain dimension of friendship: I asked for help. . . .and received it in abundance! Alone in my office, tapping away on my laptop, I was nonetheless surrounded by others who cared enough to respond. I guess I'm not saying Facebook replaces face-to-face encounters, but there's something to say for its immediacy and ability to link people across geography and generation. My favorite definition of a friend came from a Fairmount middle schooler whose quick response demonstrated that he practices what he preaches: *A friend is someone who, when you have had a bad day or need someone to talk to about your problems, says I'm right here for you.*"

"I'm right here for you." That is exactly what Jesus is offering his followers in our morning text. *I do not call you servants any longer...but I have called you friends.* The social distance between teacher and disciple has been bridged, in favor of a new relationship marked by mutual knowledge and shared purpose. Jesus is the friend who loves without reservation or distinction. Throughout his ministry his friendship circle included tax evaders, people of questionable morals, the rich and the poor, insiders and outcasts. Reversing the tradition of

the times in which students wishing to learn the Law sought out a rabbi whose teaching they wanted to emulate, Jesus did the choosing.

Jesus is the friend who shares our experiences of suffering. He embodied a God who chose not to remain apart and removed from creation, but became part of its profound mystery and miracle. Jesus knows us because he was one of us. He understands the glory and terror of human life – of living in time under the shadow of mortality. He was unafraid to show his vulnerability and the depth of his friendship was finally shown in his willingness even to lay down his life for us all. More than anything else, perhaps, Jesus' death reminds us that friends are fallible humans. We let each other down; we don't live up to our best intentions. But Jesus' death also reminds us that our failures do not have the last word. He showed us the way of forgiveness, of repairing broken relationships, of being reconciled to God and to each other.

Jesus is the friend who works to bring enduring good to others. The love he commanded of his followers proves itself by “bearing fruit,” that is, in concrete actions for the good of another. The focus of his friendship is not self-enhancement but regard for the well-being of others.

Jesus calls those who intend to follow him to love one another in the same way---in essence, to be friends. If we look at the way Jesus was a friend, then we get a pretty good idea of how best to be church. To love inclusively, in every circumstance, by our deeds, not simply our words. It's a different path to friendship, neither as commodity nor transaction. The friendship we find in Jesus is more like communion—nourishing, fulfilling, transforming. Sometimes it expresses itself as tough love: friends don't let friends drive drunk, for example. The friendship we find in Jesus is literally life-giving. It makes every day an adventure, shared with companions both human and divine. *We have all known the long loneliness,* wrote Catholic social activist Dorothy Day, *and we have*

learned the only solution is love and love comes through community.

Friends. By the grace of God, that is what church is. That is what we are! May we love one another—together and apart---trusting that wherever we go, whatever we do, we will abide forever in God's love. AMEN.

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