

The Sixth Sunday of Easter
May 6, 2018
John 15:9-17

Lyle McKee
St. Thomas Lutheran Church
Bloomington, Indiana

Friends of God

Grace to you and peace from our loving God, and from our risen Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

The label “Christian” was first used in Antioch—a place in what is now southern Turkey. At the time, this was intended as an epithet—a judgmental term of abuse. Those who used it were poking fun at the silly folks who believed that this man Jesus, who died like a thief on a cross, was God. Believers, however, soon took the name to heart and turned the intended epithet into a title in which they took pride.

One branch of Christianity has chosen not to embrace the name Christian as a primary identifier. The group is unique in taking their cue for how they identify themselves from the passage before us from the Gospel of John. They are, of course, the Society of Friends—the preferred title of the group we also know as Quakers.

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. (15:14-15)

“I have called you friends...” says our Lord. That phrase often catches my attention as I read this passage, both for its ability to take me back to my days at a Quaker college and for its striking message.

“Those who do what our Lord commands are considered his friends.” These amazing words are spoken at the low point in Jesus’ ministry. Even though we read this passage during the Easter season, they come from Maundy Thursday. Jesus is celebrating the Passover with his disciples, and is nearing his time to go to Gethsemane and on to the cross.

Rather than portraying Jesus’ agony through these final hours, John gets at the essence of Jesus’ message. In his last hours, Jesus comes to see his disciples in a new way. He gives them the commandment to love one another, and then he calls them friends.

Those of you who share some of my age may remember that in the early seventies, Carole King wrote and sang about being a friend, “You’ve Got a Friend” was on her excellent album, “Tapestry,” released in February of 1971. Many will remember better the cover of “You’ve Got a Friend” released by her friend, James Taylor, just three months later. King’s was accompanied, of course, on the piano. Taylor’s on guitar.

[Sing.]

When you're down and troubled,
 And you need some love and care;
 And nothing, nothing is going right.
 Close your eyes and think of me,
 And soon I will be there
 To brighten up even your darkest night.

Just call out my name,
 and you know, wherever I am,
 I'll come running to see you again.
 Winter, spring, summer or fall
 All you have to do is call
 And I'll be there.
 You've got a friend.

I suppose I should have used the Randy Newman song, "You've Got a Friend in Me" from the Toy Story movies. It's more contemporary. But I do love the old Carole King/James Taylor song. Oh, well.

It is, after all, the spirit of the Maundy Thursday revolution, begun by Jesus on the night before he died for us. When Jesus bent over to wash his disciples' feet, he started a personal and social and religious revolution that would conquer the mighty Roman Empire and our hearts. It's a revolution that we carry on every Sunday when we break bread together in the Eucharist.

Those first disciples had planned to follow Jesus into glory and power and sit on thrones in his kingdom. Then, suddenly and unexpectedly, the One they wanted to be King stooped down and began to wash the feet of his followers. It must have been a profoundly unsettling and humbling moment. What could this be about? The man they considered a king was kneeling at their feet and doing the lowly labor of a servant.

It would be a while before they discovered the answer. The next day, Jesus was killed, and the disciples dispersed. Their illusions were shattered and their hopes dashed. They were badly in need of some small ray of light in their darkness. Then Jesus, the one who had called them friend, was there to brighten up this darkest of nights.

Whenever we feel hopeless, when life closes in around us, in the midst of the darkest night, we discover a desperately-needed friend. Jesus is there for us, always—to the end of the age.

Isn't it amazing that Jesus calls us friends?! This is God incarnate, walking alongside us in the dust of the earth, reaching out to even the worst among us and calling us friends. Not subjects. Not slaves. Not worshippers. Not simply tools to be used in the work he has for us to do. But friends. No less.

Once upon a time, respect for elders was the abiding rule. We called our teachers and our parent's friends "Mr." or "Mrs." or "Ms." One sign of adulthood came when your parent's friends started to consider you a friend too, and asked you to drop the titles and call them by their first name.

I had a lot of fun on Thursday with a group of about 140 7th graders from Brown County who dropped by here as the last stop on a world religions field trip. They went to the Buddhist Temple, the Islamic Center, the Jewish Center next door, and then here—as their one stop related to Christians. When the teacher asked me how I wanted the kids to address me, I said—as I nearly always do and as you know—"Lyle." That took her aback a bit, but she introduced me that way. And then it occurred to me that this was a good entry point for talking about the way Christians are meant to treat one another and think of one another.

So, I began my remarks on the Christian faith by talking about how I dislike titles and why. God, after all, made each one of us and loves us. God makes no distinctions among us. We are all of equal worth and have full dignity in the eyes of God. So, why make distinctions in the ways that we address one another?

As it happened, that comment led to a really fine discussion and lots of questions. It was a blast. And one of the teachers—one of the principals, in fact—said he just might drop in sometime. He'd been looking for a church.

Friends of Jesus deal with one another as friends, as equals, as beloved and blessed and vital partners in the loving fellowship of Christ. John, in today's gospel, doesn't say that the disciples then started to call Jesus by his first name, but it must have been something like that.

This image of friendship with God in Christ may seem rather commonplace to some, but for many it comes as a stunning revelation. We often have an image of God as judge, and it's turned on its ear when we see that the judge is our friend. That old saw "It's not what you know, but who you know" is divinely operative here. Christians have friends in high places.

It's always fun to watch friends and family compete in athletic and other contests. I remember fondly watching my brother play on the Virginia Tech basketball team in 1973 as they competed in and won the National Invitational Tournament at Madison Square Gardens that year. It's fun to say, "Hey, that's my brother." Or "Hey, that's my friend, the tournament champion."

How much more then ought we celebrate this friend of ours, Jesus, who gained victory even over the grave, and who has handed over to all of us the trophy that came with that victory. On it is written, "Death has been defeated." "Death has died." "Alleluia." And we have the privilege to proclaim, as we do each Sunday, "Hey, my friend Jesus, has risen! Alleluia!" Friends share in the joy of accomplishment.

And friends take joy in the same things. I'm not talking here about superficial things like sharing tastes in food or sports. I'm not even talking about sharing common values like honesty, kindness, generosity, and openness. Real friends share themselves in such a way that the well-being of the one is connected to the fulfillment of the deepest longings of the other. Friendship with Jesus means that our happiness is bound up with the fulfillment of Jesus' deepest desires. And Jesus' deepest desire, the thing for which he gave everything, was the reconciliation of every human being to God, to one another, and to all of creation.

Friends also speak their minds to each other openly, fully, and without fear. Real friends don't withhold their feelings, thoughts, desires, or expectations from each other. They speak honestly, and maintain the strength and truthfulness of their relationship. Similarly, we don't worry about the suitability of our prayers. It's folly not to tell Jesus about our anger, to try to pretend that we don't have the feelings we have. Jesus wants us to share our deepest desires even when we think that we'll disappoint our friend. Jesus can take whatever we have to offer, without judgment and with love. The cross stands as witness to that fact.

Friends also hold one another accountable. Real friends expect a lot of each other. What our friend does matters to us and reflects on us. We expect friends to be faithful to the friendship, and to keep their promises. So, it's important that we spend time developing our friendship with Jesus. We can't simply assume that Jesus will go the extra mile and take care of everything. It's a two-way street. Jesus is not co-dependent.

Finally, friends need each other. There can be no friendship where one person is powerless and vulnerable while the other holds all the power, has no needs, and is impervious to hurt from the other. In Jesus, God chose to cast the divine lot with us, so what we do matters deeply to God. Jesus needed his disciples to carry on his work, and he needs us today. Every one of us. The loss of a single friendship is deeply painful to Jesus. If we desire genuine friendship with our Lord, we need to be in conversation about what we might offer as well as what Jesus can do.

The invitation to friendship with Jesus is a glorious and a challenging one. He became like us, that we might become like him. He has called us his friends. As Jesus' friends, we want to be like him. We want to listen and respond. We want to walk alongside Christ in the cool of the evening, friend with friend, to sit and rest a while, to

love and be with one another, to know a peace and silence in the company of God. And to be challenged to be both our best selves and loving friends to other people and other creatures.

Jesus says to us today, "When you're down and troubled, just call out my name, and I'll be there. You've got a friend." Amen.

May the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus our Lord, unto abundant life. Amen.