

May 6, 2018  
Easter 6, Year B  
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### **From Servant to Friend**

We hear in today's gospel a message of sacrificial love that has been echoed in these past weeks. John 15 v:9 As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. v.11 I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.

In a world where it can seem that all news is bad news and when anxiety and concern about the future is a common ailment, sometimes is just good for the soul to bask in some good news for a time -- and that is what the gospel is after all. Good news. A joy transfusion is taking place. God loves his son, who loves us by way of joy. Count me in for this message. I like to recall that when it came time for us to update the mission and vision statement for Christ Church, at the last draft the word 'joy' was inserted and we made a decision to ask ourselves when we could: if it doesn't bring us joy, is it worth doing?

And there's more: John 15: Jesus said: <sup>13</sup>No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. <sup>14</sup>You are my friends if you do what I command you. <sup>15</sup>I do not call you servants any longer, but I have called you friends.

What jumps out to me is the word 'friend.' The word is hard to miss. I realize that some may use the word in different ways than others. Senators in Washington have a way of calling each other, my good friend from Tennessee or my good friend from Vermont -- and then throw personal grenades at the other's character. I'm not talking about using the word friend as a cover or shield, I want to get at what it means in the language we use and hear as believers. In the Eucharistic prayer we use this Sunday, Jesus takes the bread, gives thanks and breaks it and then gave it to his friends.

Let's first consider the friends we make. The friends we keep for years even a lifetime. The friends with whom we part company after conflict or separation. What are the qualities of a good friend, even a best friend? What is meant for Jesus, God's Son and our Lord, to go from thinking of his followers not as servants but seeing them as his friends. At what point might we ever consider our own relationship with the risen Christ as that of a kind of friendship.

I have found a way to remember the first friend I ever had.

Every week it seems we hear of a new data breach and the hacking of another computer system. Some entity or person finds a way around a firewall, grabs hold of data and demands a ransom to return it.

In days of old -- meaning not that long ago -- privacy meant keeping people off your front yard and closing the curtains so no one could peer through your windows. Security had to do with personal safety and knowing that you would be taken care if anything happened.

We are all probably unaware of how much of our so called private information is really secure. As Dorothy in the Wizard of Oz once said: “Toto, I’ve a feeling we’re not in Kansas anymore.” These are different times.

It is very rare and hard to be a church today without a presence on social networks, such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, let alone maintain a good functioning website. We no longer pay to advertise in local newspapers or pay to be in the Yellow Pages. Those things that did not exist just 30 years ago when I started my seminary training are now the bread and butter of churches getting out their messages. It is another language.

One of the rules of thumb, I’m told, in protecting your personal privacy online has to do with coming up with unique passwords, and changing them frequently. Each year a cyber security company releases a list of the “Worst Passwords of the Year.” They know which ones are bad because they are the accounts that get hacked. Among the worst passwords: 123456. Password. Letmein. Admin. Abc123. Whatever. Iloveyou. (Stop using them!)

If you are like me, when you come up with a really good and secure password, sometimes you forget what it is and you need to reset it. Which is not hard and is very possible if you can answer the security questions that you yourself selected. Such as: what is the middle name of your oldest sister, what was the mascot of your high school, name the model of your first car, etc. Let me confess to you one of my security questions. The answer to the question: name your best friend from childhood? My answer, until I change it later this afternoon, Bobby Stiers. Johnny Stiers lived next door to me until at the age of six when we moved from Cincinnati to Cleveland. We would do what kids did in the 1960’s: ride bikes, play outside until night fall, catch fireflies in the summer and occasionally get in trouble. After my family moved away I lost contact with him.

For me, choosing the name of my best friend when I was six years old to reset my password reminds me of something I could easily forget. Friendship, at its core, is about choice. I chose to make Bobby Stiers my first friend, and he chose to return that relationship.

Consider how, when it came time for Jesus to fill the 12 slots for his closest disciples, Jesus did not fill them with his relatives. His siblings or cousins. He reached beyond his kin and chose others. He chose those who would become his friends.

Sallie McFague, in her book Models of God, notes that “friendship does not arise from necessity. We enter into it freely. As such it represents the very essence of divine election in which God chooses to enter into relationship of friendship with Israel.”

The friendships I have had that become one-sided – when it’s clear that only one of two are contributing and giving – sooner or later run their course. To be and to have a friend is about balance and mutuality.

Taking its cue then our faith is not made to be one-sided. Our joy is meant to be complete not filled half or part way.

Part of our journey can mean coming to know and believe in a God who knows us even before we know ourselves. Who forgives us even before we can ask for forgiveness. Who loves us even

before we know what love is. Our whole lives are responses and reactions to a Spirit, a force, a peace, a presence, a story, a love that we never fully understand on this side of heaven.

Which brings me around to perhaps my least favorite Christian hymn ever written: “What a Friend We Have in Jesus.” It drips with sentimentality and fortunately did not make it into our Hymnal. The words: “What a friend we have in Jesus. Can we find a friend so faithful. Who will all our sorrows share? Jesus knows our every weakness. Are we weak and heavy-laden, precious savior, till our refuge, Take it to the Lord in prayer.”

Setting aside my personal opinion of this hymn, there is some truth there.

When and if we get to a place when our prayers are spoken and offered to One who lived, breathed, loved, lost and offered his life so that others could live in hope – if we can have an ease and openness in talking and listening and believing in a risen Christ and living God – then we too can make the move from servant to friend. Our fate and our faith is about much more than gathering “down here” to offer prayers and thanksgiving to a God “up there” but to reconnect always to a life and Spirit who walks with us and abide with us all our days.

Our assignment this week is to consider the friends we have made and have kept over our lifetime. How friends bring joy.