

Christ's Servants and Friends  
John 15: 12-27

*"I do not call you servants any longer...but I have called you friends..."*

We are both Christ's servants and friends! Yet neither servant nor friend alone can express the fullness of our relationship to God in Christ without the other. Friend alone seems perhaps a bit too chummy; a mite informal. Thus I struggled a bit with my choice of our opening hymn, *"What a Friend we Have in Jesus."* Indeed we do, but what kind of friend? How is Jesus your friend? How are you his? Servant alone won't quite do, either. Being a servant comes perilously close to being a slave. But to freely choose to serve is noble. Today's lesson is again in the context of the last meal Jesus shared with the disciples, when he placed the towel around his waist, took the basin, and washed his disciple's feet as an act of deep care. Being a servant of, and in Christ in no sense requires being subservient. Being a true friend in no sense means we have a casual relationship; not if we are true. Quite to the contrary. Yet each balances out and informs the other.

That said, Jesus says something rather different. Jesus says to his disciples that he no longer calls them servants, but friends! Why? Servant here does have the implication of slave in the language and culture of Jesus time. While in our egalitarian age we may need to develop a greater sense of servant-hood, Jesus is saying to the disciples that they are on an intimate relationship with him. What a Friend they have in Jesus!

So let us think just a little bit about what it means to be a friend in general, and then Jesus' friend in particular. Perhaps a slightly detoured route will help. Have you ever had a "Best Friend?" Have you ever had more than one? I have! As it happened, I even shared a birthday with my childhood best friend, Johnnie Birnie, who lived catty-corner from my home. We were inseparable. When Johnnie started first grade, and I, being a year younger, remained home, it was a long, lonely year without my constant playmate. In High School my best friend was Steve Nelmes. We thought we were hot stuff. By senior year he was President of the Student Government and I was class president. Not only that, but he and I double dated. His sweetheart and mine were also best friends; mine the one who became my life-long best friend and partner! I had yet another best friend in college, my roommate, Phil Bennett. And I was so blessed, as many of you know, to have had a best friend in Bill Abernethy, my colleague starting thirty years ago at Wellesley Village Church, and all through the years until his death. So it is curious to me that we use the superlative "best," even though that implies the singular. How can we have more than one Best Friend? Perhaps because "best" more accurately describes a quality of relationship. A Best Friend is one with whom we fall in with a great comfort and commonality even if we have not seen each other for a long time.

I've shared this anecdote before, but I can't think of a better one. In the feminist novel, *The Women's Room*, the protagonist is holding a party for a number of her better friends. During the course of the evening she receives an unexpected phone call in which the police inform her that her daughter has come to serious harm. She freaks out, and screams at her guests to leave. Most do. A few remain. After she calms she realizes why she yelled at everyone to depart. She says, "I wanted everyone to leave who would." Our truly best friends are the ones who will not leave us in our time of need. Our best friends are not just our chums, not just our pals, not even just our confidants. They are truly our servants, again, quite different from being a slave. And if the relationship be healthy and whole, we theirs.

Do you think it is at all helpful to think of our relationship with Jesus as his being our Best-Best Friend? Our lesson today starts with Jesus' *mandatum*, his most fundamental and nearly impossible commandment: "Love one another as I have loved you." Yes, nearly impossible! But the unrivaled quality of his best, best love invites our best loving to be even better. Isn't this at the very heart of Christianity, for is this not what the heart of Christ can empower in us? I do not mean to imply that this is all about being lovey-dovey and cozy. Our own best loving has a prophetic edge, an ethical drive, a moral force. Such love expresses not only God's care but also God's justice. Likewise, our true best friends will tell us what we don't necessarily want to hear, but need to recognize about ourselves!

I had not gone to the movies in months, but last week I went to the West Newton Cinema twice. First I saw the movie "Of Gods and Men," a stunning work. Based on a true story, it portrays the life of an order of French Cistercian brothers in Algeria in the late 1990's. Set apart, the eight brothers yet serve the local Muslim community. As their doctor Brother Leo is the village's indispensable dispenser of both meds and recycled shoes. But eventually an Islamacist group of Taliban-type guerillas radicalized by historical French colonization and fundamentalist religion becomes an increasing threat to their very lives. No matter that Brother Leo has healed one of them. And so the brothers all struggle mightily with the thought of leaving, knowing their lives are in extreme danger. The story builds to a Last Supper kind of scene near the end.

The Abbott, Brother Christian, brings to the table not the customary one bottle of wine for the eight of them, but two bottles – a full wine glass for each! And then he puts on a tape of Tchaikovsky's "Swan Lake." As they fall into the mood of the music, turning deeply pensive, the camera slowly pans around the table, offering a lingering portraiture of each as they settle in to silent camaraderie as servant Brothers; some of Jesus own best friends to each other and the world. Then the extremists arrive and take them away, all but one wizened old monk who hides under his cot. They are forced to march up a steep mountain trail by rifle prod and gradually disappear into a foggy snow as the movie ends, thankfully before displaying their executions. It is the witness of their lives that lingers hauntingly within the viewer.

I also viewed “Pink Smoke at the Vatican,” a documentary film sponsored by our friends here at the Spirit of Life Catholic community of joy and justice. The film is a moving chronicle of the women who have been ordained in the Catholic Womanpriest movement. Father Roy Bourgeois spoke afterward, the Maryknoll priest who has served as president of the School of the Americas Watch, the organization which protests the United States training school for the military who have kept fascist dictators in power in Central America whenever it served U.S. interests; assassins sponsored by your and my tax dollars. Father Bourgeois once snuck into the school, located then at Fort Benning, Georgia, climbed a tree, hauled up a boom-box on a rope, and loudly broadcast Archbishop Oscar Romero’s famous Christmas sermon advocating peace. For this, Roy served jail time. Originally hailed as a prophet by the Vatican, when he was interviewed by their state radio he used the opportunity to advocate for the ordination of women. Now he has been told that he must recant that witness or he will be excommunicated. Of course, he will not be silent. Nor will the Catholic Womanpriest movement, which I find to contain some of Jesus very best friends!

Jesus’ better Best Friends are real deal. They seek to love Jesus as Jesus loved them; as Jesus loves us: with a costly, costly grace. The Cistercian brothers and our contemporary ordained Catholic sisters did not entirely choose their circumstance. Circumstance chose them, and they were equal to its call and claim. Jesus says “You did not choose me, but I chose you.” If you, too, did not choose Jesus as your friend, you would not be here this morning. Yet I ask you to think about the way in which he has chosen you. What fruit does he charge you and me to bear? What lasting fruit? Whether we ourselves have the courage to choose our chosen-ness or not, we can be absolutely certain of one thing: the Spirit of the Risen One in, around, and through each one of us remains; abides. On a good day we not only know this, we behave in ways that reflect it. In the face of conflict and threat, best friends hold on. When something inside our own selves screams at us to bail out, to be safe, we hold on. We stay put. We remain. We abide. We abide in Christ since He abides in us. No matter what befall, in what we choose and in what chooses us, we remain servants and friends of the Best-Best Friend of all!

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Weston, Massachusetts, by the Rev. Dr. Philip J. Mayher, Pastor and Teacher*