

**May 5-6, 2018**

***"The Yoke of Friendship"***

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**The Sixth Sunday after Easter**

**John 15:9-17**

**Acts 10:44-48; Psalm 98; I John 5:1-6**

Abraham was called "*a friend of God*" (James 2:23), and one must wonder what trouble is unleashed upon anyone who is known as God's friend. Fred Craddock recalls being stranded in a small town by a cancelled flight; with nothing that would get him out as planned, he spent an unexpected overnight stay at a nearby hotel. It was a Saturday night and since he had an afternoon flight the next day, he inquired the next morning for a church within walking distance. Upon arriving at a small cinder block building where a handful of elderly members were singing gospel hymns, he watched as the preacher painfully walked to the pulpit. The man was large and suffered from a number of maladies that included poor eyesight and faltering speech. His opening words on the text describing Abraham as "*a friend of God*," began with these words: "Abraham was a friend of God. I'm sure glad I'm not a friend of God."

The preacher recalled the story of Abram, a willing pilgrim and obedient, who after a long journey following the Voice that called him as a homeless sojourner, eventually died and was buried in a land not his own. "Abraham was a friend of God. I am glad I'm not," the preacher repeated and then went on to recall others who had also been called friends of God, faithful servants of the Divine who were beaten and cast into dungeons, souls who suffered horribly. Some were oppressed in uncountable ways while others died horrible deaths simply because they accepted God's friendship. He concluded his sermon with a story of Teresa of Avila who had taken up the cause of an orphanage and had gone about begging for financial support to keep the orphanage open. But then came the setbacks – a flood, waves of fierce storms and a fire that finally destroyed the orphanage. Finally, in her evening prayers she said to God, "So this is how you treat your friends; no wonder you have so few." The old preacher ended his startling sermon with advice: "If you find yourself being drawn into the inner circle of the friends of God, blessed are you. But pray for the strength to bear the burden of it."<sup>1</sup>

Hear Jesus' words in John 15 as they were offered to his disciples as he neared the end. Hear the words as the plaintive aching of the heart as Jesus knew what lay ahead for himself and for them. Hear them as the intimate words of one who had gave them the gift of his friendship as they acted and lived as servants of God. Hear the text again from the vantage point of his impending suffering on the cross:

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<sup>1</sup> Fred Craddock, "Being a Friend of God," *The Collected Sermons of Fred B. Craddock*, Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011, 189-190

*As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete. This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. 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. You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another. (John 15:9-17, NRSV)*

It's easy to get distracted from how these words were given and to get caught up in the sweet invitation to be Jesus' friends. We romanticize the harsh words so we can escape feeling troubled by them. We sweeten the tough ideas that will cost us something if we live by them. We live our faith from our narcissism and think all God has to do in our partnership together is to pave the way for us to live our best life. We forget that God is "all in" in the world and God needs us to be God's friend by obediently and sacrificially serving the world. It's not hard to think about Jesus' love for these disciples knowing they would move forward past the empty tomb and to carry forward his words and his life. They would move beyond all this with the energizing presence of the Holy Spirit. But the rest of the New Testament is clear. What looks like a promotion from being slaves to being friends comes with a cost. Perhaps it would help us to think that when Jesus calls us friends, he's calling us to a relationship that implies love and mutuality "in all weathers." It's a friendship that's deeper than anything we know in this world of superficial friendships that have no responsibilities and have no real commitments. Got a friend like that? Like you, I've been through some tough struggles and it's surprised me that in those moments when they're past, I have a clearer notion of who my friends are. Some so-called friends weren't around when I need them and yet others stepped even closer when I had a great need.

The disciples did not choose Jesus, he chose them. Think about that. They were called by Jesus to join him; they did not go out seeking him. He initiated the search for them and decidedly reached out to them to follow him. For most of the time they spent together, he taught and acted and modeled the way he expected them to think and act. In that sense, they were apprentice-servants under his guidance. Now they were being taken to a new, deeper level of relationship as Jesus called them his friends. What we see in these words is Jesus preparing them as his friends to become his hands and feet for the on-going mission of God. In so doing, he was preparing them for the yoke of his friendship. To be forever tied to the mission of God by service and sacrifice. We have the wonderful gift of God's friendship and have been drawn closer to God but it comes at a cost.

Lionel Blue and June Rose wrote a wonderful parable to vividly describe this way of living. It's a parable about Heaven and Hell, heaven being the place of goodness, and hell being the place of evil. Most of us know the line between goodness and evil

can be ironically difficult to discern. In their parable, a rabbi wanted to see both Heaven and Hell and God who has hidden such opposites and their unity from us, agreed to allow him a chance to see the two. The rabbi found himself before a door which bore no name. He trembled slightly as he saw it opened mysteriously before him. Inside the room was a banquet table laid out with food for a feast. The table was spread with great dishes of steaming food and the smell of it inflamed his appetite reminding him how hungry he was. Sitting at the table were diners with great spoons in their hands, yet they were shrieking with hunger, and fainting from thirst in that terrible place or torment. The spoons in their hands were so long when they tried feeding themselves they gave up because the spoons God had given them were so long they couldn't reach their faces. They couldn't get the food to their mouths. They stretched out their arms, but their mouths remained tantalizing empty. So they were starving while great bowls of food were right in front of them. The rabbi understood the shrieking cries were the cries of Hell. He closed his eyes in prayer and begged God to take him away from that terrible place. And the door to that place closed.

When the rabbi opened his eyes, he despaired because he stood before the same door it seemed; it was a door with no name and again it opened and there before him was the same room. Nothing had changed and he was about to cry in horror. There was the same big banquet table and the same steaming bowls of delicious food. Around it were the same people and in their hands were the same long-handled spoons. Yet there was no shrieking and no frustration. The cries and the curses had turned to blessing and joy. Nothing had changed mind you, yet everything was different. You see, the people at this table of bounty had taken their long-handled spoons and were feeding each other. And they gave thanks to God for the food and the chance to enjoy such blessing. They gave thanks to God the author and originator of their joy. And so the rabbi too joined them in giving thanks and for seeing the nature of Heaven and Hell, and the chasm between them, a chasm being only a hairsbreadth wide that divided them.<sup>2</sup>

Jesus invited his disciples to move closer from being servants to accepting his offer of friendship by taking on the yoke of friendship. No longer servants but friends ... it sounds like such a warm and welcoming promotion. On that same night, in that very room, Jesus dramatically took on the role of a servant and washed their feet. Preacher Craddock says "nothing strikes us as so unbecoming a follower of Christ as arrogance, as the pursuit of position and power, as the desire to be served rather than to serve." When Jesus uses the term "friend," it feels like a title but in fact he's pointing us to the relationship we have with God, faithful to God in word and deed, the total definition of who we are. The old preacher may have had it right even though it was not as sweet as sweet tea. "If you find yourself being drawn into the inner circle of the friends of God, blessed are you. But pray for the strength to bear the burden of it."

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<sup>2</sup> Lionel Blue and June Rose, *A Taste of Heaven, Adventures in Food and Faith*, London: Barton, Longman and Todd, 1977