

The Church of the Good Shepherd

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John 15: 9-17

Let us pray. Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice; for the Lord is near. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

This is the second week of our annual stewardship campaign. That dreaded time of the year in which the leaders of the church send you letters and emails, and speak to you from the pulpit about the importance of giving to the church. Typically, the Rector will try to impress you with details and statistics of all the good works that are done by the parish. Sometimes, the Rector will employ the power of guilt to try to get you to pledge. And if things are really dire, scare tactics of threatened slashed programming budgets may even be used.

Personally, I'm not all that interested in doing that – for a couple of reasons. First, I don't think these tactics actually work all that well. I find that as soon as you start to go there, folks just tend to tune out and not listen anyway. I'll bet half of you have already drifted off! Second, I recall Paul writing in 2 Corinthians that "God loves a joyful giver." If you are giving only because I have guilted you into it, then I'm not convinced that your gift will be truly life-giving for the parish. This is not to say that you shouldn't feel any discomfort in giving – quite the opposite, actually, for our spiritual growth comes from giving sacrificially to the point where one feels uncomfortable. But there is a difference between giving beyond our comfort zone and giving resentfully. While God loves a joyful giver, no one wants to be around a bitter one!

Plus, I am confident that we will have as much church as folks want to have. I'm less concerned with how much you give than I am with having you understand why you give. I think pledging and giving to the church is more about identity than it is about good works. I don't want you to pledge to Good Shepherd solely because we do good things.... if that were the only reason, then I suggest you give to the Red Cross or locally to FACETS instead. Good Shepherd, however, is more than merely a non-profit charitable organization... we are a community of friends.

I want you to pledge because you recognize how much you have been blessed by God and giving is your holy response. I want you to pledge because you understand that you have been made in the image of God, the Giver of all good gifts, and gift-giving is in your truest nature. I want you to pledge because you are living into your baptismal identity in community with friends. I want you to pledge to Good Shepherd because this is the community that makes a difference in your life - because You are Good Shepherd.

This stewardship season, we are exploring our holy identities as Beloved, Friends, Neighbors, and People of Resurrection. Last Sunday, as we celebrated our 140th Anniversary in 50-degree and rainy weather! I preached that we are God's Beloved and that this belovedness means that God always seeks us, always sees and knows us, and always loves us. Before all else, we are first and foremost the beloved children of God. That is the foundation of our being – God's very imprint deep within our souls.

Today, I focus on our holy identity as Friends. The very essence of friendship is community – relationship. But the quality of our community with each other is dependent upon the quality of our relationship with God. The more we know ourselves as beloved of God and are in right relationship with God, the better we are able to love each other.

In our Gospel lesson today from John, Jesus gives a rich discourse to his disciples on the nature of love and relationship in community. First, he grounds everything in this reciprocal relationship of love shared between the Father and the Son: “As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love.” As Jesus has been loved by the Father, he has loved us. And if we “abide” in his love – if we ground ourselves and source our very lives from the deep and living waters of Christ’s love for us – we will know ourselves as eternally beloved and blessed, irrespective of our life conditions.

Psychologists have said for many years that we need to know love in order to give love. In other words, we need to know that we are loved, we need to have received love, before we can extend it to others. Moreover, that “love” that we have received becomes the model for the love we share. The problem here, of course, is that the model we most often use of love is that of the imperfect love received from each other. But Jesus says, look to a different model – the model of how he loved them.

Jesus then gives his disciples a new commandment: “Love one another as I have loved you.” Jesus takes this even further to say that we are his friends if we love each other. To be his friends, therefore, we have to be each other’s friends, conceivably even lay down our lives for each other. Abiding in Christ’s love, we share love and friendship with each other...and in doing so, we are friends with Christ.

So, what is the nature of friendship that is perhaps different than other relationships? Like many human relationships, friendship implies a certain level of emotional honesty, personal authenticity, and vulnerability. One distinction, however, is that in true friendship there is no power differential – one cannot wield power over another and still be friends. Each person in a romantic relationship sometimes do not share equal power, and that is certainly the case in parent-child and sibling relationships. But friendships are forged between two people who know each other and choose to be in relationship, for no other reason than because you desire it. Friends are chosen community – freely chosen, often in spite of really getting to know a person.

This is how in in the relationship between friends, one may receive a foretaste of the great equality found in the body of Christ, as Paul describes it in his letter to the Galatians: “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” (Galatians 3:28) Maybe that is why Jesus says to his disciples on that night in the Upper Room, “I do not call you servants any longer...but I have called you friends, because I have made know to you everything that I have heard from my father.” In friendship is found the perfect sharing of one’s whole self with another – the good, the bad, the in-between.

I have found over my life that the sweetest friendships I have are with people that, as I’ve gotten to know them better over time, I found we increasingly had less in common with each other, yet our growing shared experience strengthened our bond anyway. My best friend is someone very different from me. When I met her, she was a nominal Episcopalian while I was a SBNR (Spiritual But Not Religious). Over the past 20 years, our lives seemingly have done nothing but diverge: we listen to different music; we read different books; I had a much-longed-for child while she decided never to have any; she rarely drinks while I struggled with alcoholism and recovery; she became an atheist while I ended up going to seminary and becoming a priest. Together, we have accompanied each other through tumultuous career changes, mental and physical health crises, the death of loved ones, and all the rest that life throws at you. She is my best friend and she knows me completely, warts and all, and loves me anyway.

And I have found that true friendship only grows sweeter over time. It is the hard work and investment of time, attention, love, and much forgiveness that builds true friendship, not common political opinions, recreational interests, or economic viewpoints. Maybe that is why seeking community online often ends up being disappointing. Friendship is embodied, en-fleshed, and it requires exposure of our whole selves and the willingness of another to receive us and accept us as we are – not as we may wish to present ourselves. We cannot curate friendships as we may curate our presentation of our lives online. Friendships happen not only in the joys and successes of our lives, but (maybe even especially) through our flaws and the failures in our lives.

That night in the Upper Room, Jesus looked upon his gathered rag-tag disciples. These were people he saw along his journeys, called them to follow, and entered into relationship with them not because they were smart, perfect, and spiritually advanced, rather by the simple fact that they were willing to walk the same dusty roads alongside him. Willing to drop their lives and follow. Willing to be in relationship because they felt like it.

Jesus looked at this odd assemblage and he loved them. He asked them to abide in his love and to love one another as he loved them, and then he called them friends. The ultimate promise of all this loving and friendship is the greatest gift of all: the gift of JOY. Jesus said, “I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.” This is the greatest promise of being friends in community and is certainly a reason to rejoice!

Amen.