

“You Are My Friends”

Sermon preached by Rev. Laurel Barr at Roseville Uniting Church

on May 17, 2009

John 15:9-17

My father was a teacher who moved up the ranks to be a headmaster. It seemed that just as I felt that I was getting a good friend we moved again and left them behind. And when we arrived in a new town, the other children had friendships that went right back to kindergarten. Looking back I can remember the faces and names of many friends and yet I remember in high school having to write an essay about “My greatest wish” and I wrote with a great passion that I wished I had a best lifelong friend.

Friends! How we all value a good friend! The word probably conjures up your mind the name and the face of those who have been your closest and most valued friends.

Albert Schweitzer said that in our lives “Sometimes our light goes out, but it is blown again into flame by an encounter with another human being. Each of us owes the deepest thanks to those who have rekindled the light”. He was talking about the gift of friendship: Good friendship that is given generously has the power to change people’s lives and to change the world.

We have already shared with the children some of those qualities that we value in friendship and in a lovely book entitled *the Friendship of Women* Joan Chittister talks about the bonds of friendship as treasure and wealth to be cherished. She looks at women in the Bible and what they offered that would be valued in any friendship. The list from women such as Lydia, Deborah, Esther, Ruth, Mary Magdalene and many others include a sense of self, sustaining wisdom, untiring support, courageous leadership, respect for truthfulness, empathy, acceptance, availability, abiding joy, nurture, undying intimacy.

The word for friend in New Testament Greek is *philos* which means the “one who loves”. There is this fundamental connection between love and friendship and Jesus is talking about a special love when he declares to the disciples as they sat around the table eating their last supper together before he died, “You are my friends” In verse 14 of our passage today Jesus links our friendship with himself with doing his commandments which is to love one another as he has loved us. So let’s explore this more deeply.

Firstly in verse 13 of John’s Gospel Chapter 15 Jesus talks about the giving of one’s life for one’s friends. As he sat at that table with the disciples who had shared

everything with him over the past three years he was telling them how much they meant to him: They were his dearest friends - so precious - so close and important to Jesus that he is willing to suffer danger and put his life on the line for them. He is willing to die in order to express his love. Jesus is the friend who pledges his love and fidelity regardless of what might happen to himself.

I wonder if any of you have read the Harry Potter books*. JK Rowling the author of the Harry Potter books makes this connection between friendship and sacrificial love very strongly. In the final book there is an incident for example when Harry visits the home owned by a character with the surname Lovegood. As he climbs the main staircase Harry is captivated by an extraordinary painting on the ceiling at the head of the stairs. As he examines the painting and he discovers his own portrait in it. In fact he sees not only his own face but the portraits of Hermione, Ron and Neville who are his closest friends. They have stuck together through many adventures and tribulations. Now we read that in the mural *“what appeared to be golden chains wove around the pictures linking them together, but after examining them for a minute or so, Harry realized that the chains were actually one word, repeated a thousand times in golden ink: friends... friends... friends.”*

And later because of this friendship Harry will find himself in a situation when he offers his life in order to defeat the evil Lord Voldemort for the sake of these friends and all the students at Hogwarts and their families and all the wizards and Muggles of the world. In other words Harry Potter is cast in a Christ-like mould as he dies in order that others may live.

Here in John's Gospel Jesus says “No one has greater love than this – to lay down one's life for one's friends..... I have called you my friends”.

Secondly, in verse 15 Jesus says that his disciples are his friends because he has been honest and open with them. We are all aware of people who call us their friend and yet are in it for themselves. They manipulate and use us and when we feel used the hurt is enormous. Real friendship is the love that holds no secrets. There is openness and truthfulness and trust and Jesus says “I have called you my friends” – not servants - because I have been open with you. “I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father”. I like this quotation from one of the early church Father, Ambrose of Milan in the fourth Century who wrote

“Let us reveal our heart to a friend and let him reveal his to us. A friend hides nothing if he is true: he pours forth his mind, just as the Lord Jesus poured forth the mysteries of his Father.”

Thirdly when Jesus calls his followers *friends* he is graciously inviting us into a relationship that is mutual. To be called a friend in Jesus' day was to be given a position of honour and be treated as family in that person's life.** In other words being a friend you chose to take on the obligations of family – being there when your friend needed you; caring for your friend's needs as you would care for your own needs; and such friendship this honour and care was reciprocated.

Friendship was and is still all about intimacy. Jesus chooses us to be his friends to be companions. He shows us that God is a God of relationship – the closest relationship of mutual giving and receiving. God enjoys our company just as Jesus modelled in the table fellowship he enjoyed with his friends. I don't know about you but it's a marvellous concept that takes my breath away! God needs you and me - desires you and me and all his creation to enjoy mutual fellowship. Such friendship with God means that we do not merely live under God but with God and in God. Think about that a moment.

And when Jesus called his disciples friends, he expanded and extended how they understood their relationship with him and through him their relationship with God. They are not to be slaves of a Master. Nor are they loved simply as a parent loves their little child – but they are loved as friends which implies a more mature relationship of interdependence. For us to be friends of Jesus means giving of ourselves in return. It's about mutuality.

One of the names given to Jesus is Immanuel which means God-with-us and friendship with Christ is being there with and alongside Jesus loving the world.

And so fourthly when Jesus calls the disciples and calls us “friends” he means that he has chosen us to be one with him - colleagues in the team to bring about his purposes for the world .

In verse 16 Jesus says “You did not choose me but I chose you and I appointed you to go and bear fruit – fruit that will last”

When we read our Bibles we find many occasions when Jesus uses family images to describe God's relationship with us: He calls his disciples “Little Children” and he teaches us to call God Father in a most intimate way. He tells stories about the love of God as being like the forgiving Father who waits and welcomes his prodigal son home again. But here he talks about friends. We all know the popular saying that, we cannot choose our families but we can choose our friends. And perhaps that is the point here: Real friendship is not something that is automatic.** There is intentionality here. Genuine friendship is nurtured and worked at with careful intention.

On the other hand these days it many people see faith and church membership as something that they choose much as they shop for other needs in their lives. It can have the effect of reducing our relationship with God to another consumer item.*** But Jesus says we did not choose him, he chose us. Knowing all our strengths and our weaknesses and that there would be times when we would let him down, Jesus chooses us and appoints us to be united with him in showing God's love in our relationships with others.

What a word of encouragement! Christ has confidence in you and in me. He even evokes the intimate interconnected image of the vine as he talks about the Christian life as being put into the world to *bear fruit* . Being chosen as friends is the kind of relationship that is not about filling our own needs. It is being one with Christ in our commitment to his purposes and concerns including to fill the needs of others and discovering that in doing so our own deepest needs are met .

And so we can summarise: Real friendship is intentional and to be cherished and nurtured and enjoyed. Real friendship involves mutual commitment. Jesus said "You are my friends" and made the measure of friendship the love that feels so deeply that it is ready to give everything just as he did when he died for us and for the world.

Friends in Christ, Jesus is the friend who comes into those darkened places of our lives where the flame is flickering or has gone out and fans it into flame again.

This week we have heard a lot about darkened places including the abuse and shame and damaged and shattered lives and people involved in the world of Rugby league and as it reflects on our society. We have revisited the Black Saturday fires as the official enquiry has opened. We have been confronted by the desperate displacement and desperate carnage of people in Sri Lanka and Pakistan. The issue of torture and terrorism and security has been raised again in the United States. With the Pope visiting Jordan and Israel and the Palestinian territories we have revisited the legacy of the Holocaust, the conflict and injustices of that region and reflected upon relationships between different faiths.

Jesus says "You are my friends" and he chooses us to be those human beings – those friends - who love and feel with Christ with those who are in dark places wherever and whoever they are . He has called us to work and to speak to fan the flames of justice and forgiveness, peace and hope – the fruit of love.

Let us pray: Let us bring those dark and lonely places in our own lives that need friendship and to be one with Christ - those places where we yearn for the light of his love - and let us speak openly to God in the silence of this moment –
..... Let us hear again those wonderful accepting words "You are my

friends” As we absorb these words with thanks we also hear his other words “You did not choose me - I chose you and put you into the world to bear fruit –fruit that does not spoil” ... so let us ask God for what we need in order to respond And now we offer all this up to the praise and glory of God. Amen.

Sources include

Joan Chittister, *The Friendship of Women*, Bluebridge, New York, USA, 2006,

*John Killinger, *Love, Death and Friendship in the Harry Potter Novels*, p.64, Centre for Christian Ethics, Baylor University, Texas. www.ChristianEthics.org

** Kris Lewis, *Disciples Called as Friends*, www.thewitness.org/article

***Kate Huey, *Friends Together*, Weekly Seed, <http://i.ucc.org/StretchYourMind/OpeningtheBible/WeeklySeeds/tabid/81/articleType..12/05/2009>