

“Jesus Calls Us Friends”
John 15:9-17
San Dimas Community Church, United Church of Christ
May 21, 2006

For Emily

One of my good friends is leaving in June to begin teaching at Harvard Divinity School. I've known Emily ever since I moved to Claremont in 1990. Like most good friends we've had a long history of shared experiences, both ups and downs. There have been times when our lives have closely intertwined and times when our paths were farther apart. We're very different personalities, and we've learned to understand each other. We've had to forgive each other; but even the fact that we've needed forgiveness and received it has strengthened our friendship.

We've supported each other through some difficult times as women in ministry and as mothers. We even have a favorite place to go for lunch, and sometimes at the last minute we seem destined to have lunchtime open, and we're able to meet at a time of great need. I will miss her a lot. As I was grieving my friend's moving away, a couple of weeks ago she became quite ill and could have died had it not been for immediate medical attention. This placed her moving away in a whole new perspective. Harvard is a lot closer than heaven. Now I'm OK with Harvard.

The words of Jesus in today's gospel of John come shortly before his death. How can he say goodbye to these devoted followers with whom he's shared life, both good and bad, over the years of his ministry? How can he prepare them for the long goodbye of his death on a cross? How can he make his presence with them so real that their relationship will not cease to exist even after he's not around to share the loaves and fish, the long walks, the prayerful nights? He prepares them with one word: love. Love is such an overused word that we have to define it, talk at it and around it, when we use it in order to understand which nuance we're trying to convey. How does Jesus talk about love to his disciples in this text?

First, love is passed on from God, to Jesus, to humankind. It is much easier to love others if one has first experienced being loved. Wednesday night after Bible study Tom and I were relaxing and watching a PBS show on Nat King Cole. The show highlighted his hit song, *Nature Boy*, that ends with the words: *The greatest thing you'll ever learn is just to love and be loved in return.* Jesus' love was wrapped up so completely with God's love for the world, that love was channeled through him to us in ways we could know and understand. As church we have the opportunity to keep the channel open. We

declare God's love loud and clear, especially to those who've experienced a lack of love or outright abuse or discrimination.

The second striking way Jesus talks about love is with these words, "abide in my love." Love is something to abide in, to dwell in, to allow ones self to exist in the midst of, to thrive in love.

Sometimes we have to slow down and make time to "feel the love." Our culture and our schedules do not make this easy. It helps to be intentional about abiding in love; to make time to dwell in God's love however that comes to you. For some God's love is experienced through setting in a garden, or reading the Bible, or praying in all the various forms of prayer, or coming to church and abiding in the love of the community, or sharing lunch with a friend who reminds you in words and deeds that God's love is abundant. Jesus says "abide in my love."

The third thing Jesus' says about love is that it is tied to keeping the commandments. This seems a little strange because love is not often equated with the idea of commandments, which often is associated with a list of laws. But remember what Jesus said was the greatest commandment: "Love God with all your heart, soul, and mind, and love your neighbor as yourself." Love takes work sometimes. I'm reminded of the psychological principle that sometimes it's easier to act yourself into a new way of feeling rather than feel yourself into a new way of acting. Love requires things of us. Love requires a basic level of decency to those whom God so loved. I remember talking to a man once, who was emotionally abusing a woman, and he told me, "I can't help it; I love her." To which I said, "People who love people don't act that way." Love is a commandment to act towards others with kindness and great care even when it's difficult.

Jesus describes the greatest form of love as laying down one's life for one's friends. We know how Jesus laid down his life, but how might we do this? Have you known someone who was so loving and generous that their life was spent day in and day out for the welfare of others? I think of Mother Theresa. She didn't lay down her life on one given day; she laid down her life every day. In a society that often says, "it's all about me," Jesus says it's all about others. That doesn't mean that we are to be self-effacing; remember the commandment says, "Love your neighbor as yourself." But it does mean that it's not all about me, but it's all about God. This is quite a countercultural idea but Christianity at its truest has always been countercultural. Our culture says "buy this for yourself," "treat yourself to luxury," "do what you need to climb up the corporate ladder." Jesus says, "it's not about you; it's about being spent day in and day out for the sake of God's love."

And the final striking theme of this text is the contrast Jesus makes between being a servant and being a friend. A servant is not considered an equal; a friend is. A servant can be told what to do; a friend is invited to join us in the important events of our lives. A servant is often one who does the dirty work; a friend is one who shares with us in celebrations. A servant is paid for the work they do because we might not be in a relationship with them otherwise. Jesus does not call us servants; Jesus calls us friends. Friends place us in a completely different kind of relationship with Jesus. It is a much more intimate relationship; it is a relationship not based on power over but power with. Friends call us into a relationship that helps us to be our best selves, to grow.

There's a story about a famous preacher who always drew a capacity crowd. Whenever he spoke, an eccentric old woman sat in the front pew directly beneath the pulpit. She took every opportunity to mumble complaints and contradictions--just loud enough for the preacher to catch the drift that he was not as wonderful as he was reputed to be. Others seated down front glowered at the woman and tried to shush her. But she went right on needling the preacher to her heart's content. When the old woman died, the congregation was astounded at the depth and sincerity of the preacher's grief. Asked why he was so bereft, he responded, 'now who will help me to grow?'* Friends are those special people in our lives who help us to grow.

Today, church, Jesus calls us friends. And because he calls us friends we are tasked with continuing to love the world as he did, to abide in his love as he did in God's, and to allow our lives to be spent every day for the sake of those God loves, and we are to challenge each other and the world to grow, to be the best that we can be...because Jesus calls us friends.

*Gloria Hutchinson, [A Retreat With John the Evangelist](#).