

“Discovering Joy”  
Easter 6b  
John 15:9-17

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Grace Lutheran Church  
May 17, 2009

In Jesus' Name.

In last Sunday's Gospel reading we heard Jesus say, "I am the vine you are the branches." We are as dependent on him for life as branches are on the vine. And we are as close to him and he to us as branches intertwined with the vine. Jesus follows up on this image in today's Gospel reading. Today Jesus describes our bonds of intimacy as that between friends.

Two Sundays ago 19 of our young people joined in the rite of Confirmation to affirm the faith in which they were baptized. Confirmation Sunday at Grace is always the first Sunday in May. On the prior Thursday we always have, what we call, The Witness Service. At this service each of the Confirmands gives witness to their faith in God and God's movement in their lives. Quite often they talk about friends. Family gets first mention but friends are a close second. On retirement our social security may come in the form of a check from the government but for these young people it is clear that much of their social security comes from their friends. A typical statement goes like this: "My friends are there for me in the good and happy times and they are always there for me in difficult times to help me with my problems." Out of such friendships flow a sense of well being and joy for life. Some years ago there was a movie entitled "Stand by Me." The narrator told of an incident from his life that happened when he was about the age of our Confirmands. He introduced us to the friends who embarked on this great adventure with him. He said something like, "We never again have friends like those we had at that age." Knowing this parents and pastors and teachers tell our young people, "Choose your friends carefully."

Jesus was older and presumably wiser when he chose his friends. We might wonder about Jesus' wisdom in choosing as friends those who gathered with him in the upper room the night he was betrayed. That is where we are with Jesus in the 15<sup>th</sup> chapter of John. He is gathered with them as master and servants. The servant does what the master tells him to do without knowing how that fits into any larger purpose. The servant is not in on the plans and intentions of the master. The master certainly does not show her vulnerabilities to the servants.

During the summers of college and seminary I worked for a construction company building bridges over Tampa Bay and for the highway interchanges leading in and out of the new airport. The foreman kept a scroll of architect's drawings unrolled on a table in the construction trailer. I took a peek from time to time. It looked like Chinese. He told us, "Dig here." We dug here. He said, "Pour concrete there." We poured the concrete there. He said, "Carry that reinforcing steel up the hill." We did as we were told. On Fridays the paymaster came around with our checks. Little by little the bridge took shape. When things went wrong the owner's big yellow Lincoln appeared over the hill with the superintendent's blue El Camino but the only thing we knew is that we had to undo something and do it over.

On one occasion the foreman walked in the trailer as I was looking at the drawings. He did not yell at me for lingering when I should have gotten what I was sent for and been back up the hill by that time. He rather showed me how the drawing open on the table matched what we were working on that day. I don't know that that made us friends but it cemented my loyalty to him. It gave me an interest in the work beyond the Friday paycheck. It is not an overstatement to say it gave me pride and joy in the work that I have to this day when I drive over those bridges.

This is what Jesus does for us. He makes known to us all the plans and intentions from the Father. He has unrolled for us and explained the drawings from the master architect for the salvation of the world and our own reclamation. It may look like a mess now. But there is a new creation in the works that amounts to more than patching potholes.

All those gathered with Jesus are getting a big promotion. They were servants being promoted to friends. All the promotions I know about are based on achievement. Students, you will be promoted at the end of the year after the grades have been recorded and averaged and fees paid and library books returned. I had a friend in college who had this little matter of a stack of unpaid parking tickets from leaving his car at the top of the hill outside the dorm instead of in the parking lot. The dean told him, "There will be no diploma until this matter is settled." You get a job promotion with more responsibility and greater compensation after successful service in your current job. I served a congregation in Virginia Beach, a military town, and had the opportunity to attend several changes of command. One took command of a hospital, another of a squadron of F-14s, and yet another took command of the whole amphibious fleet. The happiest was the one who took command of the chapel at the Naval Academy. That was one ship that was

not going to leave its moorings on a six month deployment, taking him away from his family. On the other hand the captain of the ship that ran aground was relieved of his command. Promotions are based on merit.

Jesus promotes them to friend apart from their merits. The Confirmands will tell us the qualities of those who deserve to be chosen as friends. They are loyal first of all. They've got your back. They won't talk about you behind your back or stab you in the back. Rather, behind your back they defend you and watch out for you. They don't always tell you what you want to hear. They tell you the truth. They don't keep secrets. They spend time with you. Surely Jesus knew that the next day Peter will deny knowing him let alone being his disciple. He knew the others would run away. How can he choose us as friends? He knows how fickle and irresponsible we are.

In Jesus we see grace incarnate. He is loyal when we turn coward. He is faithful to us when we are faithless. He is the true friend. Promoting us to friend is not a demotion for him but another aspect of the way he exercises Lordship. He is the friend who lay down his life so that we would not be friendless in the grave. Other friends can be there for us to the moment of our death. Jesus is the one friend who is there for us in death's dark vale. He is the friend who lay down his life for us. He laid it down with all the havoc spoiling the world and with all our own ruinous actions and words. There is no greater friendship than that. He is the friend who laid his life down and took it up again. He gives us access to that life.

That is another thing friends do for us, they give us access. Think back to when we were kids. Your friend went to ask her mother, "Can Rebecca stay for supper?" Through your friend you had access to the Olsen's dinner table and her mom's good cooking. By your friendship you had access to their Y membership. She gave you access to her other friends. Jesus chooses us as friends and gives us access to this table and his Supper, a foretaste of the heavenly banquet. He gives us access to his Father and the abundant life of the Trinity, the life lived between Father and Son in the Holy Spirit. He laid his life down and took it up again. He gives us access to the life taken up. That is access we need also for yesterday and today. We lay down our lives in despair and take up his life. We lay down our lives in repentance. The angels in heaven respond

with joy. Our repentance is echoed by the rejoicing of the angels. Their rejoicing lifts the mantle of shame from the shoulders of our hearts.<sup>1</sup>

Jesus gives us access to being the kind of friend he is. He says, “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. You are my friends.... Love one another as I have loved you.” He befriended us at the point of our greatest need and with no thought to our deserving. We equate love with emotion. Jesus equated it with action.

Father Zossima in Dostoyevsky’s novel *The Brothers Karamozov* says: "Love in practice is a harsh and dreadful thing compared to love in dreams." About that a pastor writes, “It is one thing to say one cares about the plight of the homeless. It is quite another to experience the sights, sounds and smells of a shelter and to listen to a homeless person's story....”<sup>2</sup>

Jesus is the friend who says, “Come with me to the food pantry to work. Come with me to make peace with the sister you have wounded. Come with me.” And in the company of this friend we discover joy.

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<sup>1</sup> Claus Westermann, “The Joy of the Angels,” *God’s Angels Need No Wings* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979), 51.

<sup>2</sup> Paul H Christianson, “God Pause Daily Devotions,” May 15, 2009, [http://www.luthersem.edu/godpause/daily\\_view.asp](http://www.luthersem.edu/godpause/daily_view.asp)