

Message Delivered at Christ Church
May 16th & 17th, 2009
TEXTS: Acts 11:19-30; John 15:9-17
Delivered by Paul A. Johnson

Here's a little bit of background to this reading from Acts...

After Paul was converted on the Road to Damascus, he started preaching there. The Book of Acts says that he preached so powerfully that his life was threatened so that he had to leave. They lowered him through a hole in the city wall, and he went to Jerusalem.

When he got to Jerusalem, the apostles didn't want anything to do with him. He had a history; and they were afraid of him; and didn't really believe he was now a believer. So a fellow named Joseph—a Jew from Cyprus who had the nickname Barnabas (which means Son of Encouragement)—apparently went to meet Paul, and then brought him to the church to introduce him to the disciples. Barnabas told everybody what a great job Paul had done in Damascus, so they let him into the community. But when Paul started teaching in Jerusalem, he taught so passionately that he made a bunch of enemies...again. Acts 9:29 says his enemies in Jerusalem were the Greeks.

So the apostles decided it was time for him to leave town. They took him to the coast, put him on a boat, and sent him back to his home town of Tarsus. I've wondered whether they got rid of him because his preaching was so dangerous it made them uncomfortable. And I've wondered whether they told him to go home because he needed some seasoning, and for his wisdom and maturity to grow as strong as his faith and passion. Maybe it was a little bit of both. Regardless, Paul got sent home to Tarsus, and left there.

Later, in this reading today, the faith arrives at a place called Antioch. Antioch is a Greek city. It arrives there because people run away from Jerusalem after the persecution, and they bring Jesus with them. It's amazing how often challenges result in opportunities. People in Antioch, including some Greek people who aren't Jews, respond favorably to the Gospel. So the Jerusalem Church sends Barnabas to help. And when the teaching of Barnabas bears so much fruit that it's too much for one person, he decides to get more help.

And here's what he does: He doesn't go back to Jerusalem. He doesn't go back to the trusted authorities at corporate. Instead, he remembers his new friend...who is impetuous, impertinent, and impatient, and all those things; and who some of the faithful sent into exile because they think he's too rough or not mature enough. He goes to Tarsus, and brings Paul back to help him. It's funny...Paul leaves Jerusalem because of trouble with the Greeks, but it is precisely to minister to the Greeks that Barnabas brings Paul to Antioch.

So I guess Barnabas saw something in Paul that nobody else did. He brings him to Antioch; bring him under his wing; and starts helping a few of the edges around Paul become refined enough that maybe even this young whippersnapper could become an apostle, himself. “You’re the one I need in Antioch, Paul” is what Barnabas must have said in Tarsus. “You’re the one who can help us, and I know you can do it...”

That’s the kind of things friends say to one another, and do for one another...

Friends see the best in us. They see what is possible in us. And when we get too focused on what’s wrong in the world or ourselves, they remind us it’s not so bad, and they encourage us. We all have times when we doubt ourselves, or doubt God. So friends remind us of what’s possible, and that it’s going to be okay.

Friends see the beauty in our souls. They see the goodness. They know us so well they know what’s in our heart, and because they see the best in us they give as much credence to our intentions as they do our actions. We all have those things in our souls that others gossip about, but which friends don’t judge. They don’t judge us because they understand Mother Theresa’s words that when we judge people, we have no time to love them.

Friends have compassion. The word “compassion,” from the Latin, literally means “suffer with.” A friend is compassionate toward us; they willingly enter into our suffering; they bear with us our burdens. They are willing to be a little bit heavier for the sake of us being a little bit lighter.

But the compassion of a friend also has a purpose...to help us stand taller; to help us be more able to find joy and hope even when it seems joyless and hopeless, even when the friend is absent. True friendship lends strength, not dependence. There’s a huge difference between suffering with another and solving another’s problem, and true friends know that difference. Friends never leave. But sometimes they might let go so that we can learn what we need to learn.

A true friend will lose the argument for the sake of the relationship. But that doesn’t mean there isn’t space for disagreement in friendship. It’s just that in friendship, the disagreements rarely become personal. And when they do, the bonds of affection are such that forgiveness is sought and given. Because all relationships, no matter how close, sometimes require forgiveness and rightness. “Love means never having to say you’re sorry” is the silliest thing Ryan O’Neill ever said. If there is never apology or forgiveness, then it probably isn’t deep friendship, and probably isn’t real love.

We listen to the true friends in our lives, and they hold us accountable. In true friendship, we ask one another the difficult questions...not about stuff that’s “out there,” but stuff that’s “in here.” True friends don’t give unsolicited advice. As a friend of mine has said, unsolicited advice is merely a veiled form of criticism.

But there are moments when a true friend may ask us whether we are living the life God intends us to live. Good friends hear in our voice and see in our eyes what is left unsaid, so they know when to ask whether we're working too hard; or becoming too interested in the man or woman at the water cooler; or not pulling our weight at home or at work or in the Church. Good friends can ask us how we're doing in our prayer life, or worship life, or giving life; whether we're putting first things first. And good friends know when to stop asking questions, and just be silent. Good friendship happens when we are vulnerable to another, and so good friends know what's going on inside us. And it's kind of funny...that same question can be asked by a friend as an act of caring and love precisely because it's a friend who asks us.

True friends stick. True friendships span both time and distance. I've found that good friendships—when they get to a certain place--don't always need the daily maintenance our more distant relationships require to stay alive. An old friend from twenty years ago called me a while back. He was in town, and my wife and I shared a meal with him. He lives in Connecticut. We live here. We had spoken and exchanged emails maybe twice over the last eighteen years. But being with one another that day...it took about five minutes to get to that point where it felt as if we'd just seen one another last Sunday, and were again talking about the things that matter to us, and laughing.

For there is joy and laughter in good friendships. Find a few good friends, and you'll find laughter. Find laughter, and you'll probably find a few good friends. It's with friends that we're most likely to lighten up and be playful and goofy...because we are most playful and goofy among those with whom we are most safe and who we love us the most. Love makes us free to be silly...

In friendship there is trust, and humility, and steadfastness. There is shared memory, and freedom, and joy. Lots of joy and happiness in friendship. Our pace quickens when we're on our way to meet a friend. In friendship there is rest, for with real friends we don't have to be something that we are not. Friends don't make us smaller. They make us bigger, and closer to what we are intended to be. Friendship brings out the best in us. The word "abide" is an old-fashioned word. But friendship is one of those things in which we abide. In friendship there is grace, and mercy, and joy, and love...for the closer we get to true friendship, the closer we get to real love...

Choose to be a friend and have friends, and we run a risk. There's always the chance we'll be disappointed or let down. Every relationship worth having is always a little bit messy. It is safer and more predictable to live the isolated life.

But the isolated life is sure a lonely one, and it's not nearly as much fun, or exciting, or challenging, or loving.

If love is what's been written about most in the history of the world, friendship must be a close second. Aristotle said friendship is a single soul

in two bodies. Helen Keller said “Walking with a friend in the dark is better than walking alone in the light.” “I get by with a little help from my friends,” is probably the most famous thing Billy Shears ever said. “No one is a failure who has friends,” is what Clarence teaches George Bailey. “The only way to have friends is to be one,” said Ralph Waldo Emerson.

The Book of Sirach says “a strong friend is a sure defense, and when you have found one, you have found a treasure.”

And today, Jesus says “I have called you friends.” I have called you friends.

I have called you friends...

There are scores of ways Jesus is referred to in scripture. Google “titles for Jesus,” and you can see the list. Some are hard to understand, and some seem to keep him distant. But this one, we get. And this one brings him close. We are his friend. And that means he is ours.

He says these words at the Last Supper. He has walked around the countryside with these disciples for three years healing, teaching, and eating meals together. They have walked the walk together. There have been victories and challenges; good humor and disagreements; at times the disciples have been what disciples are supposed to be, and sometimes they have not. But there’s a lot of history among that lot, and Jesus has stuck with them through thick and thin. And at least eleven of them have stuck with him. So now, near the end, he calls them friends.

And that makes him their friend, and that makes him our friend. We may not understand what is meant when we say Jesus is the Lamb of God, or Son of Man, or King of kings, or our new Melchizidek. But we all understand friendship. We can get our hearts around this one.

So I just want to make an invitation today...to invite Jesus to be our friend; to allow him to be your friend. Not just an acquaintance, but a friend. Sitting in the car, with an empty seat next to us—imagine Jesus filling it the way a best friend would. Think of what it’s been like with the best friend you’ve ever had, and that’s the relationship Jesus seeks with us and offers us. But there is no coercion in friendship. It’s up to us to decide we want it, or how much of it we want. It’s entered into willingly. So I’m inviting us to be willing.

But there is one other thing maybe worth saying about friendship... Real friendship is mutual. In real friendship, we don’t just take. We also give. Friends certainly do not ask us to do unrighteous things. They don’t ask us to lie, or cheat, or steal. But they do ask something of us. And we all know from our own friendships, when a friend calls we respond...even if it’s difficult or uncomfortable. I’ll drop what I’m doing for a friend. I’ll do what a friend asks. I’ll do it because they’re my friend, but I’ll do it because my friend, by asking, thinks I can.

Well, our friend asks something of us. He asks us to be friends to others. To make friends, and be friends. He asks us to love one another. And he is so hopeful that we can, he asks us to love one another the same

way he loves us. And you just think about those words for a moment to consider the magnitude of what he sees us capable of...

We could spend hours talking about what love is, and what it means to love. But today Jesus doesn't command us to talk about it. He commands us to do it. The preacher could talk, and talk, and talk about what love looks like—that it looks like encouragement, and compassion, and freedom, and forgiveness, and accountability, and steadfastness, and shared joy; that really, it looks like friendship; that it looks like what Jesus give us. But we all know that. In the end, it's doing it that matters.

And today, our friend asks us to do it. To love others the way he loves us...not simply because it's good for the other, but because it's good for us...because the closer we get to real love, the closer we get to real friendship. And you know...you can't have too many friends. There's that line at the end of the movie "Stand by Me," where the narrator says we never have friends as good as the ones we have when we're twelve. That's true only because when we grow up, we let other things get in the way and we don't try as hard. But it doesn't have to be that way. Friendship is just an act of love away.

So for a minute, I invite us to sit a spell, and abide in Christ a bit, and say our prayers...maybe we thank our friend for being a friend. And then, let's get particular. Who is it that needs us to be a friend? Who it is in your home; or in your family; or in your church; or in your office; or at the lunch table who needs some proof that real love is possible? Who needs the friend? Because we can be it, and someone needs it. Paul needed Barnabas. Someone needs us.

So we'll ask God to show us who it is...and then for the grace to act...and to love...maybe, even, as he loves us.

After the message, Missy Jennings sang "Abide in Me," recorded by Kristen Chenoweth. The lyrics are below.

Verse

When you abide in me
Then I'll abide in you
My words in your heart...child believe
That when you seek my face
And make me your first love
Then all the rest...will be taken care of

Chorus

Don't worry what the future may hold
For I have overcome the world
And all these things I speak
Our solemn joy may be complete
When you abide...