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**Church of the Beatitudes United Church of Christ**

Friends Together

*A Sermon by*

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Scripture: John 15:9-17

May 16, 2009

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♯ God is still speaking,

“No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.” John 15:13

From the Greek we have learned that there is more than one kind of love: Eros, a sexual love; Philia, brotherly, sibling love; and Agape, a self giving love, a love like that of Jesus, who was willing to lay down his life for another.

All of these loves are contained in the other, sort of like a set of rings lying on top of one another, making a nest. At any one moment, one of the rings will be given a little or greater charge, and the love dominates the experience. Yet each ring is quite distinct in character from the other, each intimately relational and life transforming.

Yet how often do people, including myself, use the word love without care or concern for its depth of meaning?

People talk about being friends—“I love ya, man”—and you may feel the manipulation residing in it. You can be pretty sure it is just bull feathers. I really have no idea what anyone else thinks it means, but when you have been through a trial together, a death or near death experience with them and come through the other side of it, this kind of alchemical fire tends to burn away the fog.

As the story is told, once there were three young men, roommates in college. They did everything together. They learned to drink beer, cram for finals, and survive without parental presence. They have been there for each other as they met their future life partners and recognized the stupefying narcotic of love—Eros—made decisions about their life work, built homes, bore and raised children, made and lost fortunes, had their hearts broken and found new life each time walking side by side.

As happens, they moved apart, got caught up in work, and saw less and less of each other in their daily life. Then one day a trial emerged when one of the friends got really sick. He had broken up with his partner, was between relationships, had been traveling for work constantly, and found he just couldn’t keep up. Then in the middle of the night he was so sick, he needed to get to the hospital, so he called his old friend. Of course, he came right over, drove him to the hospital, and he was admitted. He went through days of testing, and when the results came back, the doctor gave him the news. As the words settled in, he found himself crying, and before he could ask for help he threw up

That night after work one of the friends showed up, wife and kids in tow. Paul asked “So what’s up big boy?”

John lost it and began to weep. It was all too much. Ellen, Paul’s wife, quickly gathered the kids, walked to the side of the bed, gave John a kiss and hug and said, “Call me” and left the room.

The room was silent a long time. John kept trying to talk, but his throat seemed to close up. How could he tell his friend? John felt so ashamed, filled with terror, like a black tunnel had open at his feet.

John held his breath, and then repeated what the doctor had said “Paul, I have Human Immunodeficiency Virus, HIV”.

Tears came to both. Then Paul said, “We will get through this. I am here. We are in this together. We need to call Steven. He will want to be here. I’ll call Ellen, tell her what’s up, and have her take the kids home. You call Steven now!”

On the night that Jesus was arrested, after the foot washing in the Gospel of John, there are a series of what has come to be known as the “Farewell Discourses” (John 15:1-16:33). In this story Jesus speaks to the Disciples from his heart, encouraging them to stick together through the hard times, to make God’s way of love the way of their lives in word and in deed. What might it mean for Jesus to call you his friend or loved one? To be named in such a way calls for reflection. Me? He must really love me. What obligations, opportunities and responsibilities does this present? How am I to give support in a community in a time such as this?

What has changed is that we are no longer “slave and master” but now friends—“loved ones”?

When we are in slave-master relationships, we are in relationships of power. Power leaves us either as dominating or dominated roles. When the relationship shifts to friends and loved ones, we are set free to choose as equals how we will respond, how we will listen and how we will act. In the shift arises freedom, and in that freedom transformation can take place. Much like adding heat to things transforms its character, so freedom of responsibility brings a radical to the experiment. The change ingredient in this case is love.

When Steven arrived, Paul was silently sitting in a chair next to John who was lying in a bed with IVs connected to him. As Steven walks in, he says, “So why am I always the last one to know?” Paul, looking up from John says, “Because you are always working. John chimed in, “But we love you.”

As they gathered at the bedside, Steven said, “Can I pray? I need to.” The three friends join hands, and Steven feels tears begin to run down his cheek as he whispers “God of love, in you we abide ...”. When he had finished the prayer, they said together “Our Father. Amen.

Today, we are inviting you into a new context for life. We want to thank each and every one of you that joined us for dinner and conversation on the Roll Out plan. It is not a top down Senior Pastor or Ministry of Administration telling you what to do. Instead it has been a collaboration of all the people for a future in which each of us is asked to step up and add our hearts and hopes and love toward a transformed tomorrow. It already has borne some successes. I invite you to join me in claiming your piece of it for a new life together. It is our plan. Let us abide in that Christ-like love

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