

FRIENDS
John 15: 1-17
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Jesus said, "I have called you friends," and I have been wondering what he meant, what is the nature of having such a friend and being one after his manner, and in his name.

The television series Friends ran for ten seasons. The premise of the series was thoroughly contemporary. Six twenty-something young adults share adjoining apartments and for the most part live together, experiencing the ups and downs of dating and work and all the embarrassments and awkwardness of learning about life.

The series asked the ongoing question of whether men and women can be friends, attractive to each other, but without becoming physically involved.

Friendship in that television series was a happy thing. The way friendship should be, even when sad things are happening, because these friends really care about one another.

Ernest Campbell, the former pastor of the Riverside Church in New York, once said, "Friends are a wonderful thing. Everyone should have one or two." "Any more," he said, "would be too many."

I have often thought that generally speaking, friendship comes more naturally to women than it does to men. It must go back to the caves or some early period when we men innately learned to keep an eye over our shoulder to protect our back. We are cautious in establishing anything that approaches an emotional connection with others, so cautious are we about investing our emotions altogether.

But still there are powerful friendships that have nothing to do with gender and that are some of the strongest and most enduring relationships in life, tested in the crucible of danger or crisis.

On this Memorial Day weekend I am reminded of the many stories of friendship and heroism that are told by Tom Brokaw in his book, *The Greatest Generation*. He tells, among many, the story of a particular marine in the medical service during World War II by the name of Bob Bush. Brokaw writes:

"Thirty-two days into the campaign to take control of Okinawa, on May 2, 1945, Bob Bush was attached to a rifle company of Marines on the attack over a ridge against heavily fortified Japanese positions. Bush was constantly on the move, going from one downed Marine to another to patch them up and get them evacuated.

Then he was called to help a Marine officer gravely wounded and lying in the open on a ridgetop. Bush didn't hesitate. He went directly to the officer's side and began administering plasma just as the Japanese attacked the position. His Medal of Honor citation describes what followed:

In this perilously exposed position, he resolutely maintained the flow of life-giving plasma. With the bottle held high in one hand, Petty Officer Bush drew his pistol with the other and fired into the enemy ranks until his ammunition was expended. Quickly seizing a discarded

carbine, he trained his fire on the Japanese charging point-blank over the hill, accounting for the deaths of six of the enemy despite his own serious wounds and the loss of one eye suffered during the desperate defense of the helpless man.”

"No one has greater love than this," said Jesus, "to lay down one's life for one's friends."

The heroism of a Bob Bush is an exceptional thing. And thank goodness that the call to such heroism in wartime is a call that is in the past for that Greatest American Generation, and not one today's generation must face at this time.

But we are all called to give our lives for others, nonetheless, not so much in sacrificing them in death or in perilous danger, although there is probably not a parent here who would not trade places with a son or daughter in danger without even thinking about it. But most of our "giving of our lives" has more to do with what we do with our living, what of ourselves we give away in the matters of everyday life.

Jesus, of course, was thinking of himself when he said that, "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends." Because that was exactly what Jesus was about to do for the sake of those very disciples who were listening to him. Give his life for their sake.

"I have called you friends," he said to his disciples, those friends for whose life he was about to give up his own. "I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing "

The word for friend that Jesus uses in Greek, *philos*, from which Philadelphia draws its name, means love. It is a friendship based in love, and, for Jesus, that is a love that derives from God.

"Love one another as I have loved you," he said to his disciples and to us. Love one another as *philos*, friends.

"I have called you friends," said Jesus. But what does it mean for us to be called by Jesus, by this name, "friends?"

For those disciples seated at the table of the Passover meal it must have been quite startling for them to hear him call them that. Each hearing it in his or her own way in the larger context of who they were and what they were about to do.

One of the friends at the table was Judas, who would betray him. And Peter was there too, who would deny him. John was there, to whom Jesus would entrust his mother's care that next day as he lay stretched out on the cross dying. And then there was the woman who would anoint his feet with fragrant and costly oil, an extravagant expression of her *philos*, her love for him.

They were the ones at the table, the ones he called his friends. And it is sheer grace that he thought of them so affectionately. Slow to understand the full meaning of his words. Always asking for further instruction, sometimes unclear about Jesus' meaning even after he had explained things to them yet again, ever so patiently. They were not always the brightest or the most likely, not the most winsome or best educated, they, like Jesus, had no form or

comeliness that we should desire them. And in their fumbling way they were barely able to live up to all that with which he entrusted them. And yet, they were the ones into whose hands he delivered the church. The ones whom he called friends, and the ones whom he charged to love one another as he loved them.

The key to understanding this friendship that Jesus called into being among the disciples was his explanation to them that he was the vine and they, the branches. The main root of the vine being God. So that to be in Christ was to be in God, and all the disciples were a part of that living branch that found its source and sustenance in the Divine Source of all love.

I am the vine, and you are the branches, Jesus said, abide in me as I abide in you.

And at last we are at the heart of the matter. To abide in Christ is to be one in him. To be his friends. To find our common bond and unity in the vine that binds us all together. In Christ.

Jesus chose to call his disciples friends because of what bound them together ... in spite of all that might have driven them apart. They were, after all, so different. The disciples with their feet firmly planted in the soil of Israel, and in the dark cold water of the Sea of Galilee. And Jesus with one foot on earth and the other in heaven at that very moment when he called them friends, ready to return to God.

But isn't that the way with friends, with best and closest and most intimate friends ... that we are so different, as well as so alike. And that is part of what makes it so hard to keep a friendship, and yet so worthwhile when it works, that we are so different from one another.

That is, in the final analysis, what it is to be the church. We are all so different from one another. We might well have not chosen to associate with one another were it not for Jesus. There are people in the church who are not of my politics, not of my social group, not of my theological slant, not of my race. Some I would not imagine I could find one thing to talk about of interest between us if we were marooned on that proverbial South Sea island. Yet, for the common weal of being a friend in Christ we cannot but have a rooting and grounding together in him that binds us in ways that are as much mystery as they are anything that we can comprehend.

I think of Kathleen Norris' description of the church of which we are a part, and even though I have quoted it before it's worth hearing again:

"We are not individuals [in the church] who have come together because we are like minded. That is not a church, but a political party The church is like the Incarnation itself, a shaky proposition. It is a human institution, full of ordinary people, sinners like me, who say and do cruel, stupid things. But it is also a divinely inspired institution, full of good purpose, which partakes of a unity far greater than the sum of its parts. That is why it is called the body of Christ."

"I have called you friends," Jesus said. And we have not always lived as such in the church. The letters that Paul writes to the early Christians are a documentation of the fact that the church has not always lived up to its calling as *philos*, as friends. What else can explain the fractious contentions of the congregations in Corinth, and Rome, and Ephesus, and Galatia addressed by Paul?

But in spite of the humanity of our less than gracious efforts to be friends in Christ, that is what Jesus has called us to be nonetheless, and it is our work to abide in him, and so with one another.

These are hard days in the Presbyterian Church. As the General Assembly prepares to meet in Minneapolis in just a few weeks there will be the usual wrangling over ordination, and whether we ought to rescind 60106b, or send any more funds to the National Council of Churches, or be supportive of the Women's Ministries of the church, or whatever this year's "hot button" issue will be.

It will be tense, and once again the church will strain at the seams, but the challenge will be for us as a denomination to hear Jesus' voice above all the voices of disagreement and rancor. The voice that is a voice of judgment as well as of grace, when he says, "I have called you friends." "Love one another as I have loved you."

The church is at its best, I think when a deacon stops by and takes flowers to someone in the hospital, or when someone in the congregation takes another some freshly baked bread and a card when a child is born. It's never better than when all those helping hands are pouring tea and setting out finger sandwiches for a reception when there has been a death at the church. We are at our best when the kids from the church fellowship go to a nursing home and sing carols at Christmas time. It is an act of *philos*, of Christlike friendship when someone drives another who doesn't drive a to a church dinner, someone who would otherwise have sat home all Sunday evening alone.

And are they not friends indeed, when the choir spends an afternoon singing the Rutter Requiem and praises God who gave us life and receives it back when we must let it go. That's the church I think about where friends abide in Christ and he in us.

And it is a sign of grace, because in so many respects we have so little in common, except for him.

"I have called you friends," Jesus said, and our hope and prayer in these days is that we can be worthy of it, of being his friends, when we agree and when we disagree, when we are of one mind and when we are of many, when we are at peace and when we are in disagreement. Because if those of us in the church whom Jesus called his friends cannot be branches growing out of the same vine, then there is little hope in this poor world for the kind of peace and unity for which we so earnestly pray.

"I have called you friends," he says to us today. And so we are, unlikely as we are, different as we are from one another. Cantankerous, difficult, stubborn, confused yet sure of ourselves. He has called us friends, and made us friends in him. He is the vine, and we are the branches. Abide in him. And love one another as he has loved us. Thanks be to God. Amen.