

Jesus, Cathy and John John 15:9-17

Saint Marks United Methodist Church, Charleston, WV 6th Sunday of Easter Sunday (May 10) 2015

9 As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love. **10** If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. **11** These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full.

12 "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. **13** Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends. **14** You are my friends if you do what I command you. **15** No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you. **16** You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, he may give it to you. **17** These things I command you, so that you will love one another.

Today is the Sixth Sunday in our Easter Series: THE IMAGES OF JESUS. You can see in the box in the bulletin, and on the easels before me, the various images of Jesus we have looked at so far. Today, we focus upon the image of Jesus as FRIEND and what that really means to us.

This passage of Good News has some provocative lines:

"You did not choose me, but I chose you." How do those words make you feel? Comfortable or uncomfortable – particularly the part about chosen by Jesus for an appointment in life – to go and do certain things?

When you heard this passage read, did you hear the radical difference Jesus draws between "servants" and "friends." This does not describe a Jesus high and inaccessible, does it? Some people want to keep Jesus so high up there, that they can also rely upon the excuse, "But I am only human." What does "friendship with Jesus" mean to you. They say that couples have

“their song.” Jane and I had “our song” from back in our dating days in high school. But a male friend and I also have “our song.” It’s about friendship:

Old friends, old friends

**Sat on their park bench like bookends
A newspaper blown through the grass
Falls on the round toes
Of the high shoes of the old friends**

Old friends, winter companions, the old men

**Lost in their overcoats, waiting for the sunset
The sounds of the city sifting through trees
Settle like dust on the shoulders of the old friends**

Can you imagine us years from today?

**Sharing a park bench quietly
How terribly strange to be seventy**

Old friends, memory brushes the same years

Silently sharing the same fears

Time it was and what a time it was, it was

**A time of innocence, a time of confidences
Long ago, it must be, I have a photograph
Preserve your memories, they're all that's left you**

Then there are those words from the 13th verse: “**Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends.**” These words are often seen on war memorials acknowledging the sacrifice made by those in battle. Meaningful as they are in that context – and they certainly *are* meaningful in that context -- can you see how this saying might have meaning for you beyond this military context in your life?

Old Friends don’t just sit on park benches.

There were two friends who graduated with Jane and me in high school: John Oesterle and Cathy Bell. I have known Cathy since first grade. My mother was her third grade teacher.

John has had some serious health issue for most of his adult life. The most recent problem was the death of his kidneys. If he did not receive a kidney transplant, he would most likely die. Strangely enough, as I heard the story, members of his family did not have a very good match for him. However, an old friend from high school days, Cathy, had a perfect match.

John and Cathy have both been married (to other folks) before, but are both single now. They are not in any family or romantic relationship. They are FRIENDS. Cathy and John went to Pittsburgh 11 days ago, and Cathy gave one of her two kidneys to save John's life. They now each have one kidney. She is back home. He is still in the hospital.

When I heard of this story, the words of today's scripture came to my mind: *Greater love has no one than this, that someone give his kidney for her friend.*

This is what Jesus is talking about. Friends who love. Lovers who are friends.

How many of you here today are "Christians"? Show of hands please.

That means – literally: "little Christs."

That means you are called to be friends, as Jesus called you: Bearing fruit.

Laying down their lives – as a soldier dying on a field, as a friend who gives up a kidney, as someone who goes all out, not holding back, for the sake of the other.

Much of what moves the world today is FEAR. Cathy certainly would not have been criticized if she had said: ***“No, no, I would like to, but I need both my kidneys. Why do you think God gave us two? If I were to give John one of mine, and then something happened to my remaining one, then I would die. No, no, I’m sorry. Part of me wants to, but I just can’t do that.”*** But she did not say that.

In a late night conversation with a pastor friend from another part of the state, he hypothesized that, ***“Most of what people do today is driven by fear. We live in a fearful world,”*** he said.

I began doing some research, looking at many articles, a majority of which was from Psychology Today. And I found that my friend’s hypothesis was consistent with the research.

Mobilizing your fear of an opposing political party's agenda and policies has become pretty commonplace in political campaigns, today. But, it goes much beyond politics. The research, empirical and from psychotherapy, shows that there are **fundamental differences between a life centered on fear and a life centered on love.**

I thought that it was pretty significant that social science research came up with the same polarity as found in 1 John, chapter 4 – as was used in our Call to Worship: ***There is no fear in love, but love casts out fear. We love because God first loved us.*** Here are some of the psychological ramifications of those two lives.

In a fear centered life, there is a real servitude to the fear, no real sense of freedom. The fearful person has a deep need **to feel like they are in control.** In a love centered life, there is not the paralyzing need to feel like you are in control, in order to be safe.

The fear centered life focuses most of his/her attention on what has happened in the past, and what might happen in the future. The Love centered life tends to live in the moment.

The fear centered life rarely has a sense of peace or contentment in life. Just the opposite is true of the love centered life: inner serenity, peace and contentment are par for the course.

Fear centered people are usually looking for approval of their actions from other people. Their self-awareness depends on what others think of their conduct. Love centered people tend to be much more self-aware, and willing to make changes. Their acceptance of themselves comes from within, not from what others think.

Fear centered people almost always feel like there is not enough; they need to always get more, more, more. You just never know how much more you will need to face the uncertainties of the future. As a result, they live with much stress and unresolved anxiety. Love centered people have a greater sense of satisfaction with what they have. Their security, again, comes from within. Serenity and contentment are theirs to hold and enjoy.

However, the research also shows that people – although born (it seems from the research) with a predilection toward one or the other life center – are able to choose and move their life from one path toward the other.

The old proverb is true:

An old man said to his grandson, "Boy, I have two tigers caged within me. One is love and compassion. The other is fear and anger."

The young boy asked, "Which one will win, grandfather?"

The old man replied, "The one I feed."

Cathy and John chose LOVE. Fear could have been their choice. But fear leads to death – even death lived out in life – never being secure, never being open enough to really know friendship other than “what can you do for me” style friendship.

I asked earlier how many of you are Christians.

That means – literally: “little Christs”

That means WE are called to be friends, as Jesus called US.

Bearing fruit.

- As the BODY OF CHRIST – which is the identity of the Church – what are we doing that helps people cast out fear?
- Are we a church that knows its identity is based upon friendship – with Jesus and with all who need a friend?
- We need to be a church that is made of friends.

This past Thursday night, I was eating dinner downtown, with some friends from church, when an underground explosion and fire occurred, which knocked out electrical power and set off fire alarms. We had to evacuate the restaurant, and make our way home. Later that night – about 10:00 p.m. – I drove back downtown, to see if the power had been knocked out at the Church, so I could notify our tenants.

It was a very strange sensation as I came westward on Washington street. Stop lights were out. Street lights were out. The Post Office across the street was completely dark. Everything south of Washington Street toward the river, for about a 20-25 block area was as dark as an underground coal mine; the overcast sky permitted no heavenly light to shine down.

But there, on my right, were the lights of Saint Marks – like Jesus said, a light set on the hill for all to see.

And it occurred to me that this is what we, the Church, are supposed to be.

In a world filled with, and driven by, fear – we the Church, need to be filled with people who have Jesus as a Friend, who live lives based on that friendship – love centered as the antidote to fear centered. We need not chastise the fear centered ones; we must needs show them a better way – as light in the midst of darkness.

I'm grateful for Jesus' words and life.

I'm grateful for Cathy and John who understood what that means. (And John has promised me from his hospital bed in Pittsburgh that when he is able, he wants to come and personally share his story with the people of Saint Marks.)

And so I end today's sermon as I began: "You did not choose me, but I chose you." How do those words make you feel? Comfortable or uncomfortable – particularly the part about being chosen by Jesus for an appointment in life – to go and do certain things? To go and bear fruit.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.