



# Massanutten

PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

## Friends of and in God

A Sermon Preached by John P. Leggett

May 17, 2009

*Sixth Sunday of Easter (Year B)*

John 15:9-17

The Beatles weren't the only ones to suggest that "all we need is love." In this section of John's Gospel—when Jesus is saying goodbye to his disciples—you can get lost in the maze of ways that Jesus sounds the same theme over and over again: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you ought to love one another. The world will know you abide in God by the love you have for one another. The Beatles may have put it to music, but Jesus lived its truth: All we need is love.

But Jesus was smart enough to know that throwing that statement out there—even repeatedly doing so—is no guarantee that the disciples would get it. And, of course, we have so many corrupted notions of what it means to love that Jesus was forced to say something like this. "You want to know what that love for one another looks like? It looks like a friendship in which you love one another so much that you are willing to give your life for the other."

And so today, when our Open Door Ministry has encouraged us to bring a friend to worship—when we will enjoy fellowship and form or deepen friendships in the Gathering Area following the service, I want to think about friendship itself, as well as consider what Jesus is inviting us to be and do as his friends.

"Friendship (after all) is a much-underestimated aspect of spirituality....Like the sacramental use of water and bread and wine, friendship takes what's common in human experience and turns it into something holy." True friendships are great gifts—and all too rare.

Perhaps you have a story like this buried somewhere in your memory. I am thinking of the day I ran out the front door of the house I grew up in in Dallas, took a quick veer to the right so that I could leap over the bushes lining our front porch. I was in a hurry to catch up with my older brother, Mark, who was just then crossing the street. He was on his way to Bill's house. Bill was my brother's age—a year older than I—but I had always been included in whatever I wanted to be included in. But not this time. I was greeted with words of rejection.

In a voice which still rang with childhood sweetness, I heard Bill speak these deadly words: "You need to go home. I don't want you here." There was no reason for my banishment. He simply—in the all-too-common cruelty of childhood—used all the power he could muster to send me on my way.

To this day, I identify that as the time when I realized that not everybody would share God and my mother's view of me. The burning tears of rejection did more than trickle down my cheeks that summer afternoon in Dallas. They also burned to the core of my humanity, and in some ways, they marked me so deeply and indelibly that I can still picture the scene in great detail. I suspect many of you have a story like that lingering

somewhere inside you.

It always comes as a shock to us that not everyone likes us just as we are. I had grown up on a steady diet of God's love. "God loves you," my family and the church would say. And I believed them. "We love you," my family would tell me. And I believed them. I took them at their word.

I met someone recently that could understand what I was like as a child. I was helping out with my older daughter's Brownie troop not too long ago when they were trying to earn their sports try-it badge. I was asked to help them learn a bit about soccer. One of the girls in the group did fairly well on one particular drill, and when I commented on how well she had done, she said something like, "I know, I'm outstanding. Just ask my mom or my dad."

It's a great feeling to be loved, isn't it? To be liked. To have someone delight in the sheer fact that you are in their presence. There's not a one of us—even the most introverted—who doesn't like to experience the joy of being liked, the joy of giving and receiving friendship. And, at least for a while, we buy into the notion that we are loved and will be loved.

That idyllic world-view doesn't last forever though, does it? Sooner or later we discover someone who doesn't love us—someone who treats us as a trespasser or rival or even as an enemy. Do you know what I'm talking about? We meet someone who views us as a threat, who sees us as a person to shun or avoid, who looks at us as if we don't belong. At some point, we wake up to the truth: God may love us and that may be the defining reality of our existence, but we also live among people to whom we are the enemy.

Eugene Peterson, one of my favorite authors, writes that if you were to take a quick look at your life, you will most likely find that you are "criticized, teased, avoided, attacked, shot at, abandoned, stone, cursed, hunted down, snubbed, stabbed in the back, treated like a doormat, and damned with faint praise. Not all of those things, and not all of the time, but enough of them and often enough to realize that not everyone" thinks about us the way God does. (Peterson's book is about King David and is titled *Leap over a Wall*. Quotes which follow, unless otherwise noted, are from that book.)

But a friend does. And Jesus calls us friends. As Frederick Buechner once wrote: "Friends are people who you make part of your life just because you feel like it." He goes on to write that "your friends are not your friends for any particular reason. They are friends for *no* particular reason. The job you do, the family you have, the way you vote, the major achievements and blunders in your life, your religious convictions or lack of them, are all somehow set off to one side when the two of you get together. If you are old friends, you know all those things about each other a lot more besides, but they are beside the point. Even if you talk about them, they are beside the point. Stripped, humanly speaking, to the bare essentials, you are yourselves beside the point. The usual distinctions of older-younger, richer-poorer, smarter-dumber, male-female even, cease to matter. You meet with a clean slate every time, and you meet on equal terms. Anything may come of it or nothing may. That doesn't matter. Only the meeting matters."

And here's where friendship becomes a matter of spirituality, of humanity. You need other people in your life to help you discover and become the person God created

you to be. And they need you.

“Each of us has contact with hundreds of people who never look beyond our surface appearance. We have dealings with hundreds of people who the moment they set their eyes on us begin calculating what use we can be to them, what they can get out of us. We meet hundreds of people who take one look at us, make a snap judgment, and then slot us into a category so that they won’t have to deal with us as persons. They treat us as something less than we are; and if we’re in constant association with them, we *become* less. And then someone enters our life who isn’t looking for someone to use, is leisurely enough to find out what’s really going on in us, is secure enough not to exploit our weaknesses or attack our strengths, recognizes our inner life and understands the difficulty of living out our inner convictions, confirms what’s deepest within us. A friend.”

“(Martin) Buber said that the greatest thing any person can do for another is to confirm the deepest thing in him, in her—to take the time and have the discernment to see what’s most deeply there, most fully that person, and then confirm it by recognizing and encouraging it.”

And I think when Jesus calls his disciples friends there in that farewell section of the Gospel of John, what Jesus is doing more than anything else is confirming what he sees in those disciples—and in time in you and in me—recognizing our value and worth, confirming that, and then calling us and setting us apart.

What does it mean for us, then, to be friends of and in God? According to Aristotle, we are most likely to make some particular virtue our own by emulating those who already embody it. In other words, when we become friends with those whose lives we most seek to emulate, there is a greater likelihood that our own lives will begin to bear those marks as well. Aristotle even goes so far as to suggest that “a friend is another self,” which is another way of saying that in a real way *we become the company we keep*.

In thinking of being friends of and in God, then, we discover that a true friend who loves as God loves will, in time, teach us how to love as God loves.

“When Jesus says ‘you are my friends if you do what I command you,’ (then,) he is not simply offering a useful or pleasurable friendship to those who have done his bidding.” No, what he’s doing is describing friendship at its deepest level. Through this friendship, we hope to take on God’s characteristics as our own—and to love one another as God loves us.

And you know what the love of God looks like. It looks like a stranger being welcomed. It looks an enemy being forgiven. It looks like a friend laying down his life for another. May God mark us as friends of God, and may we be friends with one another and with all this world that God loves and cares for so deeply.