

Date: 09/23/18

Title: Welcome friends and neighbors

Scripture Reading: John 15:12-17

A few years ago, there was a car company that put out a very clever commercial. It was so clever that it stayed in my mind for a long time. It featured several adorable children looking directly into the camera and asking questions about how far their parents would go to protect them. Wide eyed innocent faces asked questions like, “Would you run into a burning building to save me? Would you walk through a snow storm to find me? Would you fight off a grizzly bear to rescue me?” After seeing enough of these sweet, innocent faces that are looking into the camera, even people who don’t particularly like children will have their hands up and saying, “Yes, I would go any length to come and protect you!” After a dramatic pause, one last child stared into the camera and asked for one last sacrifice, “Would you drive a minivan?” It was clever marketing move. I think, perhaps because it points to something about human nature. We are quick to say that we would go to great lengths for our faith, for our friends and for our family. Probably, because we are of course sincere. But I wonder if it is also in part because we’re willing to gamble that we are not actually going to be asked? When is the last time you saw a grizzly bear attacking or a child needs to be rescued from danger? More likely we are faced with smaller sacrifices, risks, embarrassment and inconveniences that are likely to happen in our everyday lives.

It is these sacrifices that are at the center of our gospel story today that are anything but small or merely inconvenient. As the disciples of Jesus who live on the side of crucifixion and resurrection, we know the death, the meaning and the power of these words that Jesus is speaking to his disciples today. It is through his actions that we are reminded of Christ willing to go to offer us his welcome. To offer us the inclusion into the life and into the heart of God, indeed, to be counted as friends of God. In his last earthly moment, Jesus gathered with those disciples and he washed their feet and he prayed for them. He taught them and he taught us profound lessons about servanthood through his words and through his actions. He gave those disciples the commandment to “love one another just as I have loved you”. At the very least, there would be no confusion about what he means by how he loved his friends. He outlined exactly what God will look like. No one has a greater love than this. To lay down one’s life for one’s friend and understanding of friendship that he would live out. But this is more than just one-time act of servanthood and gracious friendship that Jesus offers to us for our benefit. Jesus is setting an example for us of what friendship looks like. He shows us how we are to approach one another in friendship. This is what discipleship looks like. This is what friendship with God and friendship with one another looks like. All the conversations that we have been having about Christian welcoming, hospitality and friendship have these gracious acts of Jesus as their source. We are invited to do as he has done to lay down our lives for our friends.

By the fall time during the months of September and October, it is another season for the weddings. It is a lot of fun for everyone. People are more dressed up than they have ever been. As we sit down with the wedding couples, we think about relationships. I found myself saying over and over to the couples the same advice that was given to me when I got married which was, “Pay attention to the little things, small act of kindness and generosity, humility, servanthood and forgiveness.” But these aren’t small things at all. In fact, these will impact the foundation on which your marriage relationship will be built. However,

this is not just an advice for married couples. Friendship and all other relationships here in the church are built on the same foundations. At the beginning of a marriage service, we have heard these words from our book of worship, “In his sacrificial love, Jesus gives us the example of love of husband and wife.” This is certainly true in marriage, but it’s equally true for all of our Christian relationships. As a matter of fact, those words about Christ sacrificial love and words originally about marriage have far more to do with this friendship that we were hearing and talking about in today's gospel lessons. In his sacrificial love, Jesus does give us the example of husband and wife, but first he gives us the love. It is the example of the love and truth of friendship. It depicts much more than the image of the sacrifice of Christ hanging upon the cross. It also depicts the small acts of kindness, generosity, humility, servanthood and forgiveness that would part of Jesus every day ministry among his disciples and those who followed him.

Friendships are holy and sacred. For Jesus, friendship is the ultimate relationship with God as we heard Linda read the scripture today. Friendship matters and attentively to him Jesus said, “You did not choose me. I chose you.” In that passage, chosen by Jesus stated and revealed to us everything that was trusted to him from God. You and I get invited into that most intimate relationship between God of the Father and God of the Son. Everything that God shared with Jesus he shared with us. He chooses us. If there was any doubt remaining about how seriously Jesus took friendship, he lays out for us clearly right here. No greater love has one than this than laying down his life for his friends. We are invited to approach our friendship with that same dedication.

I’ve been wondering what is the literal sacrifice of one’s physical life? Is that the only way that we can adhere to that commandment? What if there is more than one way to lay down your life for your friend? Maybe there is one that is not quite so literal but is in every way just as important. We talked about our lives meaning many different things. Sometimes when I talk about my life, I mean my physical heart beating and breathing body. Sometimes when I talk about my life, I mean something else entirely. When I say that my life is so much ritual and fuller because I can share with my friends my deepest anxiety and my highest hopes, I am talking about my emotional and my spiritual life. When people tell me that their life can never be the same after they have children, they are talking about their family life, social life and even their professional life. We mean a lot of things when we talk about our lives. So, what we would be called here from Christ to lay down is to sacrifice our social and professional life to each other? What if we are called to put aside our egos for the love of our friends? What if it is in those every day small acts of a kindness and generosity, humility, servant hood and forgiveness that we can learn and practice? What does it really mean to lay down our lives for each other? What would that look like? What would it look like if it seriously took Jesus’s words to lay down our lives for each other?

Do I look like a person who takes time out of the busy week to cook for the hungry and deliver foods to the shelters? Do I look like I am concerned about our sick church members and checking on their well-being before taking care of myself? Do I look like a person who cares for the poor and brings can goods to help them even though I may need those can goods? Do I look like a lifelong friend keeping faith day after day at the side of my friends facing a devastating diagnosis? Do I look like a woman sitting quietly at home and knitting a prayer shawl for the sick church family or emailing members to look for prayers for those who are in need? Do I look like someone saying, “I am sorry, I’m sorry that my ego got the best of me and I couldn't ask for your forgiveness and sorry that I have hurt you” Do I look like that? Do you know what? It does. I have seen someone like this in our congregation laying down his or her life

sacrificing times for the love of friends in this congregation in each one of these ways that I've just described.

We have gathered here in September on Sundays to reflect around the themes of welcoming home. We've been praying and have heard together about how we are first welcomed by God to be home, then how we welcome and invite our Christ into our homes and into our lives, and now we think about how we welcome and invite our friends and our neighbors. How do we invite friends to be part of this church? We might mention our excellent children programs or choir team, or you might tell them about the various ways they can be involved in missions, outreach and group studies. There are a lot of ways and we can tell our friends how to come and be involved in this church. But, most importantly we should answer the question "Why?" Why should they want to be the part of this church family? Why? It is because we lay down our lives for each other in this place.

Now hear me, we don't always do it perfectly. We don't do it as often as we should and we could probably use each lesson and lay aside our egos from time to time. We come here because this is the place where we know and where we love each other. Where we will be loved by each other. In such small and so important ways those acts of kindness, generosity, servanthood, humility and friendship, we are a good church. You are good and the holy friends to each other. I have heard many times from our church family that First Church Baldwin is the church where has full of Jesus' love. It's the community. It's the friendship. It's the sense that I am at home. But the most important thing to me is that I am willing to lay down my life for you because I know that you all would do the same for me. In the name of the Father and of the son and of the Holy Spirt, Amen!