

**Sermon for the Sixth Sunday of Easter**  
**RCL Lectionary, Year B**  
**Acts 10:44-48, Psalm 98, 1 John 5:1-6, John 15:9-17**  
**May 10<sup>th</sup>, 2009**

**The Episcopal Church of Our Saviour**  
**Mill Valley, California**

**The Gift of Friendship**  
by The Rev. Richard E. Helmer

Several weeks ago, while I was vacationing back home, I drove down to Kansas City to have dinner with a High School classmate. Ching and her husband joined me for conversation, and Ching and I picked up right where we had left off. Thing was, we hadn't seen each other for seventeen years. We had only recently been back in touch after stumbling over one another through Facebook. A lot had happened in each one of our lives since high school. Despite our becoming fast friends our last year at McPherson High, Ching and I had gone very different ways following graduation and quickly lost touch. I went on to pursue chemistry and music, and eventually piano. Then off to seminary in the far West (where the fruits and nuts live, right?). She had gotten training as a pharmacist and moved to the Kansas City area. We both had married at different times and settled in very different parts of the world. But there we were after seventeen years, truly old friends now, chatting and laughing as though we had just stepped out of our calculus class senior year - out of an hour of helping one another through the challenges - mathematical, academic, and emotional - of our senior year. Who would have thought?

I share this with you only to remind most, if not all of you, about a story you already know in your own lives. And that is the abiding strength and the perennial nature of friendship. Any of us who have cultivated relationships for the long-term – whether a marriage or companionship or even a partnership in our vocations – we know that friendship holds the key to making it all work. Spouses must learn to become friends if they weren't friends before they married. Working relationships stand or fall on the quality of friendship that develops between the partners and teams. Indeed, spiritual friendship is a foundation of one of our most ancient practices as Christians, a cornerstone of monastic life, and a transformative grace found in the bedrock of our parish community. Christians who hang around one another for very long must become friends or part company. There seems very little in-between.

It comes as a bit of a surprise to me, given today's remarkable teaching of Christ from John's Gospel, that we do not incorporate more language about friendship into our regular liturgies. I wonder if this has something to do with the influence of monarchy on our Anglican spiritual tradition, our inheritance of a patriarchal and notably hierarchical past. It's throughout the language of our rites: Lord, King, and indeed Father – putting God at the center of our common household as the *pater familias*, and endowing God with all of the power and control. Believe me, this ancient tradition does not need to die – it has many virtues. One of the greatest is that it reminds us that we are not ultimately in charge, and that has to be a good thing to keep the primordial sin of pride in check.

But something seems to me profoundly missing at times because we are always cast in this universe of divine metaphors as subjects, though heirs on occasion; children, although sometimes reminded we are people – by that I mean more than mere infants playing at our parents' feet, scolded when we misbehave, rewarded when we are good. Has this rightly at times earned us the well-worn moniker of the “frozen chosen?” Do we sometimes lose sight in our worship (save perhaps at the peace) the warmth that self-offering friendship in community promises, that which anchors us in place through thick and thin, and holds our feet to the fire of the Spirit, our heads under the cleansing waters of baptism?

The solid spiritual food that Christ re-introduces to us in today's Gospel is the concept of becoming friends with Christ. More than the People of God, we are invited to grow up and become the Friends of God. Having incorporated into the very essence of our being the self-giving love that is God in Christ, we are in the process of becoming like him, a friend in the redemption of creation, of reclaiming all that has been wronged and violated and helping set it all right again.

It's a radical teaching that began on Maundy Thursday when Jesus wrapped a towel around his waist and began to wash the disciples' feet. It was Peter at that time who protested the role reversal – the humility of Jesus in doing to them precisely what a woman had done to him. It's an awesome moment the more I think about it. In our language, the Teacher has become an intimate, a partner, an abiding servant. And Jesus reminds Peter that if he doesn't allow Christ to wash his feet, he can have no part of him.

It might be enough for us to leave it there. When not running to God as a sort of über-parent we might console ourselves with a Christ who serves our whims, salves our wounds, and occasionally honors our work - which is what washing feet meant in his culture. But we ultimately discover in this world of pains and dead ends that there must be something more to this God of ours than simply being a simple panacea to our angst and suffering. In the words of C. S. Lewis in the film *Shadowlands*: "Something must drive us out of our nursery into the world--we must grow up!" We are called, indeed, by grace, to become more like God and less like wayward and dependent children.

But if pain often becomes - by grace - the driver behind our spiritual growth, friendship might be what draws us forward.

To be more like friends, as Christ calls us, is to live into the power of the love we have been given and to share it with others. To become servants of one another and embrace more fully the central commandment of our baptismal covenant, of the offerings of God's table – to love with a mutuality and a commitment that reflects the divine nature planted within us by the shared body and blood. To offer our self - radically if need be - for another.

Such is the call of friendship, and it is, for all of its beauty, theological dynamite in so many ways. In today's brief reading from Acts, the followers of what begins as a small sect of Judaism – a sect of folk who call themselves *Christians* – discover friends in the most unlikely social place imaginable: amongst the Gentiles. Christianity suddenly ceases to be a sect and becomes something profoundly more. Peter recognizes that Christ indeed is the light to the nations that the prophets of old had foreseen. And that means being Christian transcends cultural identity and blood-lines. The followers of Christ discover that the Spirit holds the key to overcoming barriers of race, tribe, and even tradition. And all these claims of identity are offered up in the friendship of the Gospel.

Friendship with Christ means grace has sprung the hierarchical trappings of our ancestral cultures and blown out the walls off patriarchy. It means parents do not own their children, and slavery is, at its root, an evil fiction. It means, too, that children do not own their parents, either, and students and their teachers are mutually accountable. It means that clergy do not have a monopoly on truth or on power, and the laity are just as important in the Body of Christ. It means spouses build their households on mutuality and covenant rather than dominance and contract. It means the captive are set free and underscores our obligation to feed the hungry, heal the sick, and clothe the naked. It means building trust where trust has been broken.

It means that friendship with God, like our friendship with each other, transcends time, space, and even death.

And it means that we are freed by the promise of Resurrection to become more fully who we were called to be – children, then heirs, then siblings, then friends...all made in the image of God. *Amen.*