

“FRIENDS”
Sermon Preached by Judy Chapman
May 17, 2009
John 15: 9-17; Acts 10: 44-48
Theme Story: “Love You Forever” by Robert Munsch

Would you give up your life for a friend? According to Jesus the greatest love a person can have for his friends is to give his or her life for them. We know when we hear these words that he is not speaking of a casual acquaintance but of real friendship – one that we are willing to risk and sacrifice for.

As I reflected on this passage, I couldn't help thinking of the homeless man in Winnipeg who jumped into the frigid, swollen waters of the Red River a couple of weeks ago to save a teenager who was being swept away by the strong current. In this case, the rescuer didn't know the young man at all. They had never met; much less become friends. All the man knew was that someone was in trouble and he had the ability to help. Without a thought for his own safety he dove in and made the daring rescue – and became quite a local hero for his bravery.

Stories of rescues are not uncommon. There is a “rescue” instinct that takes over sometimes and pushes us to do things that if we thought too long, we might not do. In the instant we realize someone is in mortal danger and we can do something to help, we jump in. I think it says something about the basic goodness of people. It also says something about the courage of the people who act.

There are times, too, when we have *a lot of time* to think about the consequences of our actions – and the kind of *trouble* we might get into by acting. More time to think about the consequences makes some of us more cautious and less brave. Yet there are still some folks who act to help others in distress despite the risks. There are some brave souls out there that we can learn from. In some places of the world courage and friendship are tested regularly.

I was reminded of that when I read Nora Sanders' letter last week. Nora Sanders is the General Secretary of the United Church of Canada. Each week she sends out an email to let us know what she has been up to or what she is thinking about. The first week in May she wrote that she and some of our key United Church Justice staff went to Ottawa with some of our partner church representatives to visit Members of Parliament and talk about our Church's commitment to world peace.

She said, “As we met with MPs from different parties, our partners from Palestine, Columbia and the Philippines told stories about things that were regular parts of life to them, but shocking to us Canadians: children being jailed for political reasons, Christians being killed for speaking up for the disenfranchised. These are regular experiences of life in the homelands of these partners. It was particularly sobering to hear of these human rights infractions and crimes being perpetrated or sanctioned, by the state.”

Of course, those of you who are members of Amnesty International will know that state sponsored persecutions are all too common in our world. They say nothing good about the nature of human beings. Our inhumanity toward each other is at times appalling.

So there you have it: good and bad exist side by side in the world – the impulse to save and destroy. And it is up to us which one we will focus on and bring forth. And in case we think that our own country has only behaved benevolently, Nora goes on to say this,

“Also part of our delegation was the Rev. Maggie McLeod, a Cree from Saskatchewan who serves as minister in the United Church at the Saugeen First Nation. The connection with our global partners was that Maggie was urging support for Canada to reverse its current position and ratify the UN Declaration on Indigenous Rights. Maggie’s presence in our delegation was a necessary reminder to all that peace and justice are issues in Canada as well as in other parts of the world.”

It seems we all have a long way to work at bearing the fruits of love – at loving one another as Jesus loved us.

This commandment that Jesus gives, recorded in the fifteenth chapter of the Gospel of John, is followed by a rather remarkable statement about his calling his disciples “friends”. It can best be understood in the context of the whole farewell discourse, the whole four chapters devoted to passing on his mission and encouraging the community to carry on the work of discipleship.

Whoever Jesus is actually addressing in these four chapters of John’s Gospel, they are not numbered or named. Since this Gospel was the latest one to be written – sometime around 120 C.E. (or ninety years after Jesus’ death) it is generally believed that this discourse represents the memories and the professions of faith of the community that grew up around John, the so-called “beloved” disciple.

The gospel reflects what we call the “highest Christology” of any of the four gospels. It is the gospel that places Jesus *closest to God*, giving only occasional glimpses of a very human Jesus – one who was tired, teary and thirsty at times (4:6; 11:35; 19:28). Mostly though, Jesus uses those lofty “I am” statements: I am the Bread of Life, I am the Good Shepherd, I am the Gate; I am the way, the truth and the life. These statements seem to lift him out of the discourse of ordinary mortals and suggest that at the very least, he had a ‘hot line’ to God.

So there is all this lofty stuff about Jesus, and then he comes out with the statement, “I do not call you *servants* any longer, because a servant does not know what his master is doing. ***Instead I call you friends***, because I have told you everything I have heard from my Father.

All of a sudden we seem to be at the last lecture. It is a Randy Pausch moment: a summing up of the wisdom of a lifetime before the end comes. Jesus has passed on everything he has to tell his disciples and now it is up to them to carry on the mission – to go out there and bear much fruit. And how are they to do that? By loving one another as Jesus has loved them.

Jesus had started with the two great commandments “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength and with all your mind” and “love your neighbor as you love yourself” and he then took them a step farther. He tells his followers “love one another just as I love you.” He has given them an example of how to love God and neighbor. And don’t we all need an example of how to love?

We may have an instinct to rescue, we may even have an instinct to care for others, but most of us have had to learn by example how to love.

Robert Munsch’ book, “Love You Forever” (that we read in the Theme Time) is so simple yet so profound in that he recognizes that we learn love from those who care for us. It is something we *absorb* from the people around us – mostly *unconsciously*. You’ll notice that in the story it is when the child is sleeping that the mother picks him up and sings that little love song to him. During the day sometimes she thinks that the child is going to *drive her crazy*, but at night when the child is asleep (somewhere below the level of consciousness) she surrounds him with *a forever love*.

Below the level of our consciousness God is surrounding us with a forever love. But during the daylight hours we need good role models to teach us how to befriend each other. Jesus is our ultimate role model, but we need role models in our own generation, too - flesh and blood folk who know the art of reaching across differences and finding the beautiful core at the centre of every human being.

Now the way the gospel describes this movement from “servant” to “friend” it sounds a bit like a graduation. The disciples learned enough and now Jesus considers them “friends”.

In my own experience, it happens a little differently. The sequence is reversed.

It is only when I reach out with the love and affection of friendship that I really begin to open myself to the other. That’s when I can begin to learn from the other – and paradoxically, we can both learn from each other.

You see, as long as we think that we have all the answers or all the wisdom, we don’t get great responses from people. But when we begin to forget about converting them to our way of thinking and just become open to what they have to say, we find ourselves in a much more mutual relationship, a much more respectful relationship. And if we add affection, we find ourselves in a friendship. We don’t have to “correct” or “teach” our friends any other way than by example. It is our job to offer unconditional love.

Sometimes our friends do things that we don't think are particularly wise or wonderful but it doesn't stop us from loving them. We love them for who they are – even when they exercise poor judgment.

Friends support one another in their struggles and challenges. Sometimes that support will be costly. Sometimes people have paid with their lives when they tried to support a friend.

In Canada our support doesn't usually cost us our lives. Most of the time reaching out in friendship to others is a great gift to us. We receive far more than what we give.

Yet sometimes we do lose friends by speaking out. Many of you would have seen Friday's paper that describes the journey Bill Phipps and other members of Kairos, an ecumenical coalition for justice, will be making in May (21-29) to the oil sands project in Fort McMurray. They will talk to municipal leaders, environmental groups, oil sands developers, and labour groups in McMurray and aboriginal leaders downstream in Fort Chipewyan about the moral, ethical and spiritual issues around the oil sands development. Then they will report back to their various faith communities. There will be controversy, of course.

It is risky to ask questions and listen with the ears of love. Yet our mission is to abide in God's love. That is how we love God and neighbor.

That is how we *befriend* the earth and all its creatures.

May that be our purpose and passion – in big ways and small ways to *befriend the earth* and all its creatures. Amen