

1 John 5:1-6
John 15:9-17

First Presbyterian Church of Delanco, NJ
6th Sun. in Easter, May 17th, 2009

Joyful Obedience

Today's words from the Gospel of John are the continuation of last week's passage about the Vine and the branches in which we learned more about our relationship with Jesus Christ. Now John records ideas about love and friendship.

Friendship is a rare thing in our modern world. Competition, an active society, a way of life which tends to isolate people; and these make the traditional pattern of making and keeping friends difficult. It is sad to realize the term "friend" seems to be defined more as an acquaintance; and the ingredients of a lasting friendship, such as empathy, support, and mutual struggle, are lost.

The union between Jesus and His disciples is an internal, personal relationship. Jesus defines this union and gives it content and substance. The Son loves His disciples as the Father loves Him. This is the love which seeks them out, calls them into life, and which holds them and sends them into the world to continue His mission. This is an awesome, yet tender reality. But these frail, struggling men are asked to love one another as Jesus loves them. Jesus does not give this as an option. He gives this as a command. It is not possible unless they abide in His love.

This love is not a vague, sentimental feeling which comes and goes. It is a tough reality which is revealed in obedience. Jesus shares in and shows His

Father's love by absolute obedience to all God's commands, which takes Him to the Cross. The disciples can only abide in the love of Jesus if they keep His commandments. Love and obedience are two sides of the same reality.

All this does not mean the disciples are called to a grim, cheerless life. On the contrary, if they abide in the love of Jesus by obeying His commands, they will remain in His joy! The joy of Jesus will be in these disciples always. G.K. Chesterton calls this joy "The gigantic secret of the Christian." When Malcolm Muggeridge first encountered Mother Teresa in Calcutta among those with whom she lived, he could not explain the "luminous quality" he saw in this little, plain woman. Eventually it was that joy he saw in her which drew him to Christ, who always shares His joy with those who obey Him.

It is a mystery and challenge to our earthly way of thinking that the nearer Jesus comes to the Cross, the more joy becomes part of His vocabulary. This probably sounds strange to affluent, comfort-seeking Americans who confuse joy and happiness. Joy is an unexpected gift growing out of our intimate relationship with Christ whom we love and serve, while happiness, which is sought as something to be had, often turns out to be a disappointing illusion. Happiness is like the pot of gold at the end of a rainbow which does not really exist.

The more deeply we enter into a loving, obedient relationship with Jesus, the more "full" will be our joy, like the melody which comes out of the creative

disciple and struggle of an artist who gives himself or herself to the instrument.

It is interesting to hear Jesus use the language of friendship to describe His relationship with His followers. The disciples are asked to see their soon-to-depart Lord in a new way, to accept a relationship of closeness and of give and take. But how can we be a friend of Jesus? Does this change the servant-Lord relationship? What can we learn?

First, we discover that to be a friend of Jesus means to be loved and chosen. To lay down one's life for one's friends is a dramatic definition of love which takes its meaning from the death of Christ. Our friendship with our Lord is rooted in this incredible event of sacrifice in which the Lord takes the role of a servant. From the very beginning, the disciples are deeply indebted to the One who calls them friends. Jesus reminds us that we did not choose Him, but He chose us. The decision is His. He chooses His followers.

Second, we discover that to be a friend of Jesus means to know what is going on. In vs. 15 Christ says, "I have called you friends, because I made known to you everything that I have heard from My Father." The difference between servants and friends is that friends have been let in on the plans. The disciples, for instance, are told about the coming events and Jesus' departure. They are not kept in the dark about what is happening.

John's Gospel is a story of revelation of the Word made flesh, of restoring sight to those who are blind. It promises the coming of the Spirit of truth,

who “will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you.” What makes us friends of Jesus is our being captured by the story, following the sometimes comforting, sometimes disturbing plot which leads to the Cross and the empty tomb, and finding in the story the light to guide our way in the world.

Third, we discover to be a friend of Jesus means to keep His commandments and to love as He loves. John’s Gospel repeatedly speaks of love as a commandment, an idea which sounds a little strange. For many, for love to be genuine, it should be spontaneous and come from within. Not everyone feels this way.

Jesus lives by His commandments which are also given to us as disciples to guide our lives. Vs. 9 gives us a chain of command, “As the Father has loved Me, so I have loved you; abide in My love.”

Jesus’ command to His disciples becomes very specific. They and we are to love one another as He loves them and us. This does not mean simply tolerating or being nice to one another. It is a call to enter into the mystery of Christ’s own death. As these disciples hear Jesus say that the Good Shepherd lays down His life for His sheep and watch Him lay down His garments to wash their feet, so they are to lay down their lives for each other, not only in physical death if necessary, but in a caring openness for one another which reveals Jesus.

Jesus Christ opens the way for this new kind of relationship among these disciples, calling them friends instead of servants. Christ’s love breaks

down the walls which separate the master from the slave, the rich from the poor, and the one who comes first from the one who comes last. Because the disciples are His friends, Jesus opens His heart to them, showing the purpose of His coming, holding nothing back. In the end, the greater love of His death will completely free them so they can give themselves totally as friends. They will remain His friends if they do what Christ commands them.

Jesus chooses His disciples to continue His mission. Christ appoints them, trains them, and prepares them to go and bear much fruit. It is Christ's death which empowers the disciples to carry out their work in His name. We, too, are empowered as followers of Christ to witness of Him now and in the years to come, both here and throughout the world. We, too, will remain with Christ and will bear much fruit.

We can only have mission and bear fruit through prayer in the name of Jesus Christ. Jesus calls us to a life of intercession and meditation in union with Him. His will and purpose become our will and purpose.

Jesus calls us as friends to obey His commands, to spread the Good News of His Gospel to everyone, and to love one another. By doing this, we will bear much fruit and strengthen our relationship with Him, with other Christians, and among ourselves. May God guide us as we answer Christ's call to be His friends and to follow Him in joyful obedience to His commandments. Amen.