

Living Into Resurrection: Called to be Friends

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What we are doing this morning is as old as the church herself, and yet as new as this morning's sunrise. We are receiving new members into our church. What makes this special is that these are young people, who are coming here to confirm their baptismal vows and to make their public profession of faith in Jesus Christ. A long time ago – at least to them, maybe not so to some of us – they were brought forward by their parents and the minister put some water on their heads and the people in the church made some promises. These young people didn't have a whole lot to say about any of that. But now they have been through nine months of classes, mission trips, and discussions with their covenant partners. Now they are coming to say yes to Jesus Christ, yes to membership in the church, yes to being a part of this fellowship of faith.

Before they came to this morning, they had to go before the Session, the governing board of our church. They were required to write a statement of faith, which they read to all of us. It probably scared them all to death – and to life. Writing out what you believe is quite a courageous thing. It means that you are putting it all out there, telling people some very intimate things about yourself. In their context there was always the chance that some elder was going to ask them a question about their statement and call their Christianity into question.

There were a lot of questions asked, but none of them that harsh. They were mostly questions of pursuit – like tell us more; what did you mean by that statement, I'd like to hear more about it; have you ever thought about ...? Their responses were exemplary. You can say a lot of things about this group, including that they are not a particularly shy bunch. They know their faith, they feel their faith, and they can express their faith very well. One of them even gave a definition of predestination that was the best definition of that peculiarly Presbyterian doctrine that I have ever heard from a confirmation student. It was even better than most explanations you would find in seminaries, but that's getting personal.

They modeled their own statements after that of the Apostle's Creed, with its formula of belief in the Triune God. One point that several of them made was that they considered God – especially in the second person, that of God the Son – to be their friend. It was a wonderful thing to hear young people talk of God that way: Not of God as the nasty old guy in the sky, looking for us to mess up just one little bit so we can get zapped; but God as a personal, intimate Presence, a Presence that helps and comforts and challenges.

Hopefully as they continue their journey of faith past this day they will continue to explore ways in which God is their friend. And, just as hopefully, we will all do the same thing. Because being a friend is a rare trait in our day. Being a friend of God is even rarer.

Usually when we talk about friends we are talking acquaintances; people we see now and then, people we may share some interests in, perhaps root for the same team. Our understanding of friendship is often at a surface level, because we don't want people to get too close. We like to keep our distance. Our suburban neighborhoods are built this way, complete with that great device to ensure privacy, the garage door opener. Just press a button and you can go in without saying hi to anyone.

And if you are worried about your mail, just drive your car to the mailbox and pick it up that way. No muss, no fuss, no gossip, no friends.

But everywhere around me I hear from people who want something more. Deep within my own soul, I want a relationship that is more than a surface kind of thing. I want someone who will be a friend in the sense that they will be genuine, authentic, even when they are called upon to say something tough and hard. I yearn to be that kind of friend, too.

When Jesus was leaving his disciples, he was giving them some last-minute instructions to help them along the way. But then he really did something different – he changed the tags. They have been calling him Master, Rabbi, and other titles of authority. Now, Jesus said, I call you friends. Jesus is bringing them closer to him. But what does it mean for Jesus to call them – and us – friends?

The first part is that to be a friend of Jesus means that he loves us and has chosen us. He says to his disciples in the Upper Room, “You did not choose me; but I chose you...” None of the confirmands talked about the doctrine of election, and I would have been shocked if they did. Not many of us throw around words like that. But this doctrine is a part of what it means to be a Presbyterian – and a Christian for that matter. It says that before we chose God, God chose us. But before we start glowing with how special we are, we need to check out what we have been chosen for. Look at that whole verse: “You did not choose me; but I chose you and appointed you to go out and bear much fruit, the kind of fruit that endures.” We are called not for privilege. Our being chosen by Jesus is not a cause for us to parade our good we are. It is a call for service. We are to bear fruit, the kind of fruit that endures – the fruit of kindness, gentleness, self-control and all the other fruits of the Spirit of God.

In Jesus’ time, the custom was that students would go to a teacher and ask him (and it was exclusively a ‘him’) if he would take them on as his student. The students made the choice, but it was the teacher who had the final decision. But Jesus turned that around. In the stories of the calling of the disciples, Jesus doesn’t wait for them to come to him. He goes to them - out there while they are fishing, tax collecting, and all the rest - and calls them. Through Christ, God does the same for us. We are out there minding our own business, or so we think, and God issues a call. It might not be a guy in sandals walking along the lakeshore; it might be someone calling us to help with a food pantry, or to mentor an inner-city kid, or to go to Nicaragua on a mission trip. It might be to serve on a committee, have coffee with an old friend, visit someone at the hospital. We have been chosen by Jesus to use the gifts we have been given to bear the fruit of a life well lived.

The second part is that being a friend of Jesus means that we are not left out to wonder what’s going on. Jesus tells his disciples all about it, the good, the bad and the ugly – the suffering, the rejection, and the death. But he also tells them about the glory – the resurrection, the triumph. He tells them all about it, and in the telling something wonderful happens.

A former professor of mine, Charles Cousar of Columbia Seminary, wrote that, “What makes people friends of Jesus is their being captured by the story, following the sometimes comforting, sometimes disturbing plot that leads to the cross and the empty tomb, and finding in it the light to guide their way in the world.”

The third part about being a friend of Jesus means to keep his commandment, and to love as he loved. That sounds so nice and so easy. Just love other people and you will obey his commandment.

But it’s that other part that is the sticker. To love as Christ loved is different than the kind of casual, surface, sentimental love we often show. This is the kind of love that accepts the other person

as a unique human being who is different than I am. This is a love that respects the distance between us without trying to transgress that boundary and tell the other exactly how they should live their lives, how they should raise their children, how they should make a decision. This is a love that often hurts, and often calls for something to die within us – dying to self, dying to my needs, dying to my expectations. This is the love that often struggles as we find our way with this other person whom we call friend, as they discover who they really are. And in the process of that, we discover who we most really are.

Doug Pagitt, pastor of the emerging church Solomon’s Porch in Minneapolis, was one of the editors of the book *An Emergent Manifesto of Hope*, and in his opening section he wrote about this passage from John, and he noted:

“Friendship is more than being friendly. Friendship means vulnerability, risk, struggle, and pain. It means welcoming the ‘other’ and the familiar. It means putting aside our agendas for the passion of another. It means being right but being quiet. It means being right and speaking up. It means being more concerned about the other than oneself. It means joining in life and death. It means time... For all the good that has come from the servant leadership model of church leadership, which has gained well-deserved acceptance in recent decades, there are those of us who want to move beyond servanthood as the model for our engagement with one another and take the dangerous leap into friendship as the way of understanding one another.”

These young people have already talked about the Triune God – and especially Jesus – as their friend. They are already living that out. They have lived that out as they have come to church, learned in Sunday School, led us in worship, attended their Confirmation class and – especially – as they have asked tough questions, real questions, authentic questions. The questions that lead to a deeper faith, complete with all the ambiguity that genuine faith produces. They will have more questions to ask in the years to come. We know that because we who are older have plenty of our own.

But with Jesus as our friend we know we can ask those questions, no matter what they are. We can ask them and trust that while the answers may not always be pleasing to us, they will take us down that road where we need to be – that road where the story of Jesus intersects with our own stories; where that old and new story of faith and church becomes our story. And in the living and retelling of that story, we find that friendship with Jesus is what holds us together and keeps us going. Amen.

Text is John 15:9-17

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