

**Acts of Faith:
Friendship**

Many of you know that the leaders of our congregation have been asking our members and friends to reflect on what it is about our church that they most value. The results are not fully in, but I don't think I am speaking out of turn to say that among the common themes that have emerged the sense of community found here is certainly a major one. Words like family, connection, intimacy, closeness, and friendliness have all been used frequently in describing what is valued about our church. This is interesting because it seems to indicate that we are a small congregation not by accident or flaw, but by intention. By and large, the people that choose to associate with this congregation do so because they benefit from the ability to know others and be known here. Many tried larger churches before they ended up here, but felt that in a larger congregation it is easier to get lost in the mix. But here it is clear that each and every member and friend counts and is invited to make a difference. This is an important thing to know about ourselves. It may seem obvious on one level, but on another it is no small revelation.

Likewise, it is no small revelation when Jesus says to his disciples, "I no longer call you servant, but friends." In one sense this seems clear, easy to gloss over. Of course Jesus and the disciples are friends! They spend all their time together: work, eat, sleep, travel and much more. Where else would they turn? Yet, in another sense, something new and previously unheard of is being announced. Jesus is talking about more than his connection to the disciples, but the relationship we have with God. Only two other times that I am aware of has the connection between God and someone been described with the term friend: once with Moses (Ex 33:11) and once with Abraham (Isa 41:8). Never before has it been used so broadly to describe our relationship to God.

To be sure, there are other models used in the Scriptures to indicate intimacy with God. For example, within today's passage Jesus contrasts the friendship model with that of a servant and a master which is used more commonly. To be a servant of a good master was not a bad thing. In fact, in some ways it was a desired position. A good master lovingly cares for his servants, makes sure all their needs are met and that too much is not asked of them. There could be a great deal of mutual affection in such a model, but, as Jesus points out, masters and servants are not on equal footing. The master is clearly in a position of power over the servant, even if that power is exercised with care. But friends are basically on equal footing. It is a relationship of mutual affection and freedom. Still, even in friendship, one side must take the initiative. Jesus says, "You did not choose me, but I chose you." What an amazing declaration this is! I cannot stress it enough. God, through Christ, reaches out and befriends us!

I think this is at least part of the reason why the connections we form with one another are so valuable: in some sense, they help us to understand the relationship we have with God. Really what else do we have to go on? The experience of knowing and being known helps us to understand who we are and who we are created to be. Jesus tells his disciples that you abide in God's love by loving one another as I have loved you. Yet, think for just a moment how we approach faith most of the time. We want to learn more about God or have an experience of faith before we take the next step of putting our faith into action. In other words, we do the opposite of what Jesus is suggesting. We want to love God before we love others. That is not the way it works, Jesus tells us. We learn by doing. As one theologian characterizes it, "First you leap, then you grow wings."¹

¹ William Sloan Coffin, *Credo* (Westminster John Knox, 2004) 7.

Leaping and then growing wings describes much of the development of the early Church as reported in the book of Acts. The members of the earliest Church were not experts in the faith. In many ways, they were making it up as they went along. Or perhaps more precisely put: they were learning and growing in their love for God as they lived out—acted out—Jesus’ instructions to love others. The Spirit was leading them in this endeavor, but the Spirit seemed to be leading them beyond circles of their own choosing. One leap of faith was leading to another. Fortunately, they remembered that they were abiding in God’s love not solely their own and so, in this way, their example reminds us that our faith is not so much about what we choose as it is remembering that God has first chosen us and chosen us not for privilege, but for friendship and service.

The gospel is clear: it is God’s intention that we all have loving, supportive relationships with one another. These relationships develop within community and they help us to know God. Really, this is why the Church even exists at all. Yet Jesus adds a new and very important element into our community building. The communities of friendship that we build in his name are not to be insulated. They do not exist for their own benefit or for the good of its members alone. They must have an express, outward focused mission. For you see, the shadow side of the friendship model is that it can make the community of faith seem like an exclusive club, like we believe we are friends with God and others are not. Whether that may actually be the case or not—whether or not we see ourselves that way, is hardly the point. The point is that without intentional efforts to reach out beyond the circles of friendship and connection that we build with one another, we will, by virtue of our inward intimacy, shut ourselves off from new possibilities and new calls.

The remedy for such insulation, as Jesus suggests, is to abide in God's love and not just our own. In Acts we see Peter and the others trying to do just that. They had this special relationship with Jesus that made them friends with one another and together they learned about God. Yet, at some point, they had to make a critical choice: was this experience just for them or was it meant to be shared? And even though it pushed them way beyond the realm of comfort, they trusted the guidance of their friend Jesus to share it. Likewise, we have to be willing to trust in the friendship we have with God. For surely we too have a critical choice.

The love and fellowship we experience here is something that *we should claim* as part of what is good about RPPC. But along with that claim is the reminder and warning that this experience is not an end in itself. It is, however, our motivation and inspiration to reach out to others. The caring community we have built here, the connections we have nourished with one another *are our launching pad for the life of faith*. And, of course, this place and these connections are also our retreat for refreshment and encouragement so that we can continue to go out to be God's people in the world. This is where we come not only to see our friends, but to remember that God has chosen to befriend us and this is not our own doing or initiative. Which means—and here is the really good news for us—we don't have to become a bigger congregation to do all this. We don't have to wait for more members or more money. We don't need to learn more about the Bible or theology. We don't have to be experts in our faith. We just have to be willing to take that first leap and start to live it out. And we will find that it is in the living it out, in the practice of our faith, that we grow and learn about who we are as people of faith, or perhaps more precisely, whose we are; we may discover that we have been chosen, not for privilege but for service. And from there we can just take it one leap of faith at a time.