

CHRIST EPISCOPAL CHURCH, SPARTA, NC
SIXTH SUNDAY OF EASTER, MAY 10, 2009
The Rev. J. Barry Kramer
"Friends Of God"

"This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you" "You are my friends if you do what I command you." And again, "I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you."
(John 15:12, 14, 15 NRSV)

"Jesus is God's Son, and he is my friend..." Those of you who were here Easter Sunday will remember these words of Nicholas, the little deaf boy who wanted to receive communion. As I recalled the passages from John's Gospel, I decided it might be interesting to consider what it means to be a "friend" of Jesus, and of God.

Does it take you by surprise to be called a "friend of God"? It might even seem a bit presumptuous to identify ourselves that way. But perhaps not. Because the last night our Lord was with his disciples he addressed them in just those terms, *"You are my friends if you do what I command you."* And again, *"I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you."*

As a native of Pennsylvania, I learned early on about William Penn and the Quakers. Then I went to Seminary in Philadelphia, the city of "brotherly love." It was there that I learned that it is not just the Quakers who can claim the title of *Society of Friends*, for my seminary was just that, a society of friends learning in and of Christ. In fact, it really is an appropriate designation for the church itself. We could even argue that *all* of our places of worship might also be known as meeting houses of the "society of friends."

One hastens to add that friendship in this sense is not something which happens spontaneously. Neither is it the result of our simply saying, "I want Jesus for my friend." Instead, it is Jesus who makes the astounding statement, *"You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you."* Out of Earth's billions, Jesus chooses me as a friend? That is the recurring wonder of God's amazing grace; God chooses us. Discipleship was not something which Jesus' followers chose. Discipleship chose them.

For example, a fictional story is told of Jesus and his disciples walking one day along a stony road. Jesus asked each of them to choose a stone to carry for him. John, it is said, chose a large one while Peter chose the smallest. Then Jesus led them to the top of a mountain and commanded that the stones be made bread. Each disciple, by this time tired and hungry, was allowed to eat the bread he held in his hand, but of course Peter's was not sufficient to satisfy his hunger. John gave Peter some of his. Some time later Jesus again asked the disciples to pick up a stone to carry. This time Peter chose the *largest* of all. Taking them to a river, Jesus told them to throw the stones into the water. They did so, but looked at one another in total bewilderment. There didn't seem to be any benefit to carrying the stones. At that point, Jesus asked, "For whom did you carry the stone?"

While the story is entirely fictitious, its point is well taken: Carry the stone because he asks you, not because of what you will get out of it.

Since it's Mother's Day, here is another story told to me one time by a grandmother. It's about her very young grandchild who invented a game using some colored paper and other materials. When the game was over, the little girl wanted to hide it for the future and also keep her older brother from finding it. So they hid it with appropriate ceremony and agreed to keep it a secret! Big brother soon noticed the excitement and wanted to know what was going on. The grandmother replied quite confidently, "it's a secret!" A huge pout appeared instantly! Big brother was mightily offended. In hurt tones he asked, "Have I ever kept a secret from you and my sister?" Almost as an afterthought, he added, "I thought you were my friends!" Somewhere he had learned or sensed instinctively that among friends, and family, there should be openness, sharing and trust. Grandma had forgotten the law of love for just a moment.

That is what Jesus must have meant when he said, "*I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father.*" God and Jesus were one in heart and mind and will. Nothing blocked their communion. Father and Son were friends, and friends share their selves, their purposes, their hopes and fears. A secretive Savior who hoarded his holy thoughts would have been no Savior at all. Everything he had he gave to us, even his life, because he was and is our friend!

Thus it is obvious that friendship includes love, yet somehow it grates on us to hear the words "love" and "commandment" used in the same breath. The two do not seem to go together. One speaks law, the other gospel. It is striking that the gospel accounts of Jesus' ministry never report him as giving a specific "commandment" of any kind until that last night with his friends. He just was not a commandment-issuing friend. Therefore the *maundatum*, the "new commandment," which we heard during our "walk through Holy Week, and from which Maunday Thursday gets its name, stands out even more strikingly when we hear it. Jesus surely knew that you cannot command love. Thus in the strongest possible way he underscored *the distinguishing mark of his friends* by commanding that we love one another.

Jesus also knew our human proclivity for division, dissension, vindictiveness, infighting and power-grabbing. Here at Christ Church? Why, it could never happen! Jesus also sensed the tension, anxiety and uncertainty that the disciples would feel in the long interlude between the resurrection and the coming of the Spirit. His urgent word was, "Love one another as I have loved you." That would keep his friends in unity and community.

So, are you a "friend" of God? Do you understand the "love" commandment in terms of friendship? Do you accept it? Here at Christ Church, as a part of our Discernment Process we are asked to review our "Mission Statement." It should reflect who we are and what we want to become. Currently our Statement says: *Our Mission is to be a home to all in the sharing of God's unconditional love.* If I were asked for a revision suggestion, I think that it would be most interesting to include the idea that true friends are those who love one another, even as Jesus loved us.

Wouldn't it be nice to be *totally convinced*, as little Nicholas was in our Easter story, that Jesus is truly our friend?