

In Praise of Friendship

Sixth Sunday of Easter, May 17, 2009

Jill R. Russell

Texts: Acts 10.44-4,
Psalm 98,
1 John 5.1-6,
John 15.9-17

As many of you may know, I was on vacation last week. I didn't go far from home but enjoyed immensely the time with Andrew and Cassidy and the chance for rest and relaxation that kind of change of pace provides. I joined all of you for worship through our radio broadcast (which is a wonderful gift here at Hope Church). So I heard as you heard last week this invitation from John's gospel to *abide* in God. I've been thinking about it all week long. I know some of you were taken by that same invitation because I heard a number of you talking over the sermon from last week.

It's such a counter-cultural invitation to consider yourself first by your relationship to God and second by the many different ways we identify ourselves in our world: by our work or accomplishments or our family affiliations or our national identity. Part of what kept working on my mind in reflecting on John chapter fifteen is the active nature of this invitation to abide in Christ, to abide in God, or as our passage begins today – to abide in love. How do we do that? What makes that possible? Verse ten offers a fairly direct response: “if you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love.” There seems to be a link in this passage between obedience and the ability to remain or abide in God's love. That is after all a familiar conception of the divine-human relationship for people of faith across traditions and throughout time. Some of you may have grown up as I did with a pretty strong emphasis on what Brian Wren refers to as the KINGAFAP images for God.¹

You may recognize Brian Wren's name from some of the hymns in our hymnal that he wrote. In his book, *What Language Shall I Borrow*, he argues that all of our language for God (even biblical language) is borrowed language. It is borrowed out of human experience. The question becomes: from what experience in human life will you borrow as you attempt to

¹ Wren, Brian. *What Language Shall I Borrow? God Talk in Worship: A Male Response to Feminist Theology* (New York: Crossroad, 1991), pg. 124. KINGAFAP stands for the cluster of images and metaphors for God which Wren refers to as the King-God-Almighty-Father-Protector image.

describe and conceive of God? His contention is that much of our language in worship borrows from this singular set of images he calls the KINGAFAP metaphor. Where God is called King or Lord and described as almighty and all powerful. All of these images come from areas of human life having to do with power. In this cluster of images God is the master and we are the servants and our relationship is characterized by obedience.

When we say that obedience is the organizing principle of the spiritual life then things like rules and commandments become all important. I wonder to myself: is that really what Jesus is getting at here in John? That we should focus ourselves and center our faith on commandments and rules that this is the way we will abide in love? To speak in that way is to suggest the love spoken of here is granted as the reward for obedience. It leaves me cold to think of faith or God in this way.

I suspect that is why I gravitated so strongly to the work and writing of Henri Nouwen² when I was coming out of college and going through seminary...and I know many of you do as well. His work was an antidote to all of the emphasis on those KINGAFAP images for God and all of the emphasis on obedience as the center of spiritual life. Much of Nouwen's work uncovers another set of images from scripture that borrow from a very different set of human experiences. Not from the realm of royalty and power brokerage but from the realm of family life – this image of God as the divine parent and human beings as the beloved of God. (Now I want to be clear in saying that these images for God are not mutually exclusive or bad in and of themselves. It is more a matter of emphasis.) The organizing principle of the spiritual life in this set of images is not so much about obedience as it is about belonging. For many who find themselves needing to recover from the *faith as obedience* school of thought Nouwen's work is compelling and life-giving.

I ran across some language about five years ago now that assisted me in thinking about this more clearly and making a third shift to borrow from yet another realm of human experience that I think Jesus is pushing toward in our text today. Don Postema who does work in reformed spirituality made the observation that the real problem with the image of God as master and human beings as servants is that the relationship of a servant to

² Most influential for me were the books *Life of the Beloved* and *The Return of the Prodigal Son* although I commend any and everything Nouwen has written.

a master lacks both intimacy and maturity.³ Certainly a master and servant is not an intimate relationship but it is also not a mature relationship. Servants don't have to think so much for themselves. They have simply to obey orders and perform duties. We witnessed in the Nuremburg trials how dangerous that kind of arrangement can be.

So the move toward an image of God as a loving parent and human beings as beloved children of God addresses the issue of intimacy but it is still an image (from the human side anyway) that lacks maturity. In a healthy family, children grow up and become adults. So in looking at this text from John fifteen, Postema wondered with us: "Does God have any adult friends?" It's a wonderful question that begins to move us into a new realm of human experience to borrow from in speaking about God: the realm of friendship.

It's not nearly as well developed an image as the others when you survey the language of our hymnody or liturgy. I was thinking about the connection between friendship and Gordon's sermon last week; when he asked about our casual use of the word *abide* in everyday conversation. One place I could imagine using that word is in reference to friendship. People will describe themselves as having a *deep and abiding friendship* with someone. You don't need a theological dictionary to get a hold of what is meant by that phrase. When you begin to think about what you might say in praise of friendship as an image for God, there's a lot that comes to mind. First of all, friendships unlike other forms of human relationship are freely chosen. They are not the product of biology or obligation or circumstance but are driven by mutual admiration and a sense of kinship and shared values. When Jesus gives this farewell speech in John fifteen he invites the disciples to make this move from servitude to friendship.

When you look at why Jesus says to his disciples that he no longer calls them servants but calls them friends - it has to do with both intimacy and maturity. Servants don't know what their master is doing. It's not necessary. If all that is required is obedience then it really doesn't matter why. You do what the master commands simply because the master commands it. Jesus isn't interested in creating that kind of community. But it still begs the question: if Jesus is lifting up this image of friendship as the foundation of the relationship between himself and his disciples then why does the passage still contain (as does the whole book of John) all this

³ I looked to see if Postema has written any of these thoughts into a new book and it appears that he has not.

conditional language about following his commands? Verse ten still remains: "If you keep my commands then you will abide in my love." I wonder if the answer is not found in some of the ancient philosophical understandings of friendship that would have informed the culture around Jesus' community and the community of John's gospel.

There is a wealth of material available describing the conceptions of friendship in Pythagoras, Plato, and Aristotle. There is just one theme from that material that I want to highlight here. The highest form of friendship according to Aristotle is not based in utility or pleasure but based on virtue.⁴ The highest forms of friendship are based on the "mutual pursuit of the good life." That's why Jesus keeps coming back around to this refrain of keeping his commandments. It's not because of some demand for loyalty and obedience that will be rewarded by his love and affection. It is because of his conviction that this way of living - this way of sacrificial love - is the foundation of the *good life* or the *life of virtue* as Aristotle called it or the *abundant life* as Jesus speaks of it in John chapter ten. When we join him in pursuing the kind of life built on love we will discover joy beyond measure.

The intimacy of this image is found in the knowledge that sits at the center of this kind of friendship. We are invited to know God not just to obey God but to *know* God. We are invited to understand how God operates and what God desires. That is what Jesus' entire teaching ministry is about: to help us to know God. And that was not an exhaustive effort. There is still so much to discover and learn. At the same time, it is also an invitation to be known by God. And not just in some superficial way but to be known at the center of our souls. It is truly an intimate relationship we are invited to have with God, but not *just* an intimate relationship where we are known and accepted and loved. Friendship with God is also a mature relationship - one that is grounded in mutuality - where we are pressed to grow up. I don't know if you have ever noted that language in our communion liturgy. I encourage you to listen for it when we celebrate the sacrament together at the end of the month. But there is a line in it where we pray that we may "grow up⁵ in all things into Christ our Lord." That would be an interesting intonation to take while speaking the liturgy - wouldn't it?

⁴ Ford, J. Massynbaerde, *Redeemer, Friend, and Mother: Salvation in Antiquity and in the Gospel of John* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), pg.84. The author summarizes the teaching of Aristotle on friendship and makes this observation about friendship based on virtue.

⁵ You have to hear these two words with the intonation of adolescent teenagers speaking to a younger sibling with a little bit of edge to their voice: Grow Up!

That's what friendship with God invites us to do: to move past the kind of dependency where God gives and we receive to that place where we join with God in giving something of ourselves to the world. It is an invitation to live into that image of God that is both our heritage and our destiny.

"I do not call you servants any longer...but I have called you friends."⁶

"I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and your joy may be complete."⁷

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Amen.

⁶ John 15.15

⁷ John 15.11