

Easter 6    May 17, 2009  
Calvary Presbyterian Church  
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1 John 4:20-5:6  
John 15: 7-17

All of the gospel writers tell us about a final dinner that Jesus shared with his friends, but only John's gospel has preserved this tradition of a long farewell address to those who have come to dine with him for the last time. The Bible includes several examples of this type of speech. Isaac makes such a speech to his son Esau who has been cheated out of his rightful inheritance by his crafty brother Jacob (Gen 27:39-40). In his turn, Jacob, whose name had been changed to Israel, makes a long deathbed speech to his 12 sons gathered around him down in Egypt (Gen 49). And the most famous is the whole book of Deuteronomy, which is Moses' farewell to the people as they are ready to cross over into the Promised Land without him. An orderly death requires that the dying one is aware that the end is approaching and that the loved ones gather to pay attention to the final words—a time when there is no more time for the trivial or the frivolous. This is a moment when the speaker and those gathered to hear know the words are about what really matters; about what needs to be remembered and handed on to those who will come after.

John's telling of the Last Supper story begins with the announcement at the beginning of Chapter 13 that Jesus knows his time had come and "having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end" (John 13: 1); and it ends at the final verse of Chapter 16 with Jesus saying to them, "Take courage, I have conquered the world!" (John 16:33b).

Our lesson for today is from the exact middle of Jesus' speech. We're not quite done with that image of Jesus as the vine and those who follow him as the branches designed to bear fruit. Last week we talked about "abiding" with Jesus; about remaining connected to him because, as the branches, we can do nothing unless we remain fully attached to the vine which nourishes us and gives us our very life. But in our reading for last week Jesus had just introduced that image and he still has much more to say about it. Hear the word of the Lord to you on this day, from the fourth gospel, Chapter 15, beginning at verse 7.

### Repeat the Sounding Joy

Cheryl Hartman once asked me to write morning devotions for the camp staff at Meadowkirk—our still financially endangered presbytery camp out in Loudon county—please continue to pray that we can untangle our loan commitments and preserve the presbytery's outdoor ministry. Please also pray for Cheryl who has decided that she has given everything she has to give to this presbytery and will retire at the end of the month to go home to run the family farm in Georgia. We will miss her. Anyway, she asked me to write a little something to nourish her and the counselors and the cooks before they woke the children up each morning—something to get

them going at dawn and encourage them to keep on following Jesus and keep on loving every one of the children day after day.

I decided to use this image of Jesus as the True Vine for the whole week. It just seemed appropriate for folks living so close to nature. I suggested that they read some part of John 15 every day. But each day we stopped in a different place and it threw the emphasis on to something quite different. When we stopped with the line about abiding in the vine, it seemed as if the point of the message was how hard it is for any of us to abide in anything. Our modern attention span has gotten so short. Think of how many 30 second commercials you have seen this week. I preach for about 10 minutes on Sunday—can you imagine what it must have been like to listen to John Calvin who preached for an hour or more twice on every Sunday—regular attendance required. How hard is it to keep our attention focused on Jesus as world events spiral out of control around us and even our own lives seem to be moving faster than we can keep up with? How hard to continue to do all that abiding with Jesus for not just the camping season, but for your whole life?

When we stopped at the place where Jesus talks about calling them his friends rather than his servants, we dwelt on all that means for us. What is a friend? Proverbs warns us that “Wealth brings many friends, but the poor are left friendless” (Proverbs 19:4). But also that “Some friends play at friendship, but a true friend sticks closer than one’s nearest kin” (Proverbs 18:24). I think we’d agree that both those things are still quite true. We can be somewhat dismissive with the phrase, “Oh, he’s only a friend.” When my daughter was a toddler, she introduced me to the child sitting beside her on the church steps and said, “He told me his name, so now we are friends.” Is that enough for you to make a friend? How do you know when an acquaintance turns into a friend? In Charlie Brown’s dictionary, “A Friend is someone who likes you.” Remember that little volume that we all gave to each other a long time ago? Is that enough? How much do you have to like someone to call them a friend? Do you need a response from them to establish a friendship? The word that Jesus uses here is derived from the verb *phil-eo*—to love. Jesus says he is ready to lay down his life for his friends. Maybe a better translation for our usage today would have been “my beloveds.” This is surely a more serious understanding of friendship.

And when we read just a bit further and stop where Jesus says that if we are his friends—not his servants, but his friends—we will obey what he has told us to do. That must be why he is so careful to make that distinction between friends and servants. Servants—actually the Greek word is probably more accurately translated as slaves—are required to do what the master commands. But friends have the luxury—or perhaps the hazard—of deciding whether to obey or not. Friends understand the importance of doing what Jesus has asked, and do it just because he has asked. But we don’t **have** to do it; we do because the one who has loved us—our friend Jesus—has asked it. The church has had years of conversation about exactly what it would mean to obey—to repent, to turn around, live differently, and march directly into the kingdom of God.

Or, we could stop at the commandment that you love one another as Jesus has loved us. When we stop there, we have to figure out what the world would look like if we loved as much as Jesus loved. Are we commanded to love everyone, or just fellow Christians? How could we possibly love enough?

When we stop at the place where Jesus says we must “bear fruit that will last” (15:16b) how would we do that? Presbyterian Women have been trying to do something that shows our love by bearing fruit that would last every year with their Birthday Offering. Eighty seven years ago, Hallie Paxson Winsborough—we don’t say the names of our fore-mothers in the church nearly often enough, so I like to repeat it as often as possible—Hallie Paxson Winsborough was appointed to be the first superintendent of women’s work for the Presbyterian Church in the United States. The original motion asked that she be named the Secretary for Women’s Work, but the men at the General Assembly thought that **Secretary** was much too grand a title for a mere female.

When Mrs. Winsborough went on a tour of mission stations in the Far East in 1922, she was horrified by the conditions that she saw at Miss Dowd’s School for Girls in Japan. On her return, she thought that a way to unify the women from all the churches in the denomination was to give them a particular cause to support. Her goal was to transform individual groups of hard working, mission minded women into the organization that became known as “The Women of the Church.” She wanted to find a way to let them know that what they did mattered, and the money they raised could make a difference in the world. So Hallie Paxon Winsborough asked that every Presbyterian woman give one penny for each year of her own life, or a dollar if she preferred not to reveal her age, as a Birthday Offering to go to Miss Dowd’s school. Her idea of a Birthday Offering got a terrific response. The next year the entire offering went to a girl’s school on the Mexican border. The next year they built the President’s house at Union Seminary in Richmond. And every year since, a group of women have sifted through piles of applications and carefully chosen the recipients of the annual Birthday Offering.

This year they have chosen to build a children’s home in the Ukraine—in a town I was unwilling to try to pronounce this morning. The organization called “His Kids, too” plans to build a new home for 30 orphans with special needs—a place for the truly abandoned and rejected. They already have 21 orphanages in Eastern Europe and care for more than 5,000 children. If they get enough money they will build a new facility for these kids. If the collection falls short, they have a back-up plan to re-hab one of their existing buildings to make it handicapped accessible; not as good, but so much better than what is now available. The women who went on the Global Exchange trip last year went to this place, and recommend it to us as a program that will abide in the community with people who know the needs.

The other project is called The Working Woman, La Mujer Obrera. It was founded as a self help group of Mexican-American women in El Paso who lost their textile jobs when NAFTA made it so much cheaper to do even their menial jobs in third world countries. We think of the jobs lost to globalization as being in the factories of Ohio and Michigan, but it has hit hard at the poor communities in South Texas. Corporate and municipal money has built a new community center which opened on May 1, and our contribution will fund job training and small business loans to help these women move toward economic independence.

We know that these two projects are merely representative of the needs that we see around the world, but they are two things that are possible. It’s two places where people are trying to love one another as we have been commanded; where they are abiding with those in need; where our

help will make a difference. In today's economy, a penny for each year of your age just won't be enough. Find those yellow envelopes that were in your bulletin this morning and write a check.

I only had to do six devotions for their week, but I had barely scratched the surface of all that is in this passage. Jesus assures us that he is the one who has done the choosing—we don't choose to follow him, he has already chosen us. How does Jesus think he can change the world if he is willing to entrust the project to such unskilled and undependable labor? No matter where I asked them to stop reading, they could hear Jesus talking about what really matters; about what needs to be remembered and handed on to those who will come after.

But each day, as I led those folk to linger over the last line of the passage, I was ignoring something important that I really did learn in seminary. While in Western literature we are accustomed to expect everything in a literary passage to lead up in a linear fashion to a conclusion—tell them what you want them to know, tell them, and then tell them what you told them—the basics of good communication; in first century Greek, the important thing is always in the middle. The ideas pile up to make the central statement and then are repeated in similar words as they back out in exactly the same sequence. It's called a **Chiasm**—from the letter Chi—which is the shape of an X in English. Broadly open at the top, tapering into a single point in the middle, and then opening again at the bottom, exactly parallel to the top half. And the middle of **this** passage is not in any of the interesting and important concepts that we have already talked about. This is Jesus' farewell to the troops; his deathbed wisdom imparted to those he loved; **everything** here is stuff that really matters; but the center is not the abiding, or the commandment about loving each other, or being friends, or obeying or the sureness of answered prayer. The middle of this passage, which is also the middle of the longer passage about the last supper, is: "I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete." (15:11).

We keep insisting on making Christianity so complicated, but I think Jesus is saying that when we trust what he has said and obey this commandment about loving completely—it will give us joy. Our joy will be not superficial or silly, but complete and life giving. As Jesus prepares to leave this life in an orderly fashion—exactly the way God planned it from the beginning of time, Jesus says to his beloved friends—as we often say to our children—all I want is for you to be happy.

And these are the things that I know will bring you the greatest joy; the things that will make you truly happy. These are the things that have given me joy in the task that the father gave me to accomplish here on this earth. Share my joy—that our God was willing to enter into this life to show you how to live eternally—free from sin—free from fear—free from death itself. That's all I want for you. Share my joy—that can be your joy, too.

Hear the grand summary of the faith in what we call a Christmas carol, but in reality is an Easter song:

Joy to the world; the Lord Has Come; the Savior Reigns, He rules the world with truth and grace; the very hills and plains echo his praise; join in the song; repeat the Sounding Joy. Repeat the sounding Joy. Repeat. Repeat the sounding Joy.