

New Beginnings: Spiritual Friendship
Acts 10:44-48
John 15:9-18

Bloomfield Presbyterian Church on the Green
May 10, 2015

My sermons during the month of May are my contribution to the discernment phase of the New Beginnings Process here at the Church on the Green. Those of you who have signed up for the New Beginnings small groups have begun your work and I thank you for investing your time in this endeavor. I hope to be a part of the overall conversation through my preaching. And that is one reason why today's sermon is not a Mother's Day sermon, but focuses instead on *spiritual friendship*.

I consider spiritual friendship to be a defining mark of a church. It's something that makes a church a church. Most people have friends. You don't need to be part of a church to have friends. In fact, you don't even have to get up off the couch to have friends anymore. Thanks to social media you can collect virtual friends by clicking the "friend" button on your Facebook page all day long, which will then allow you to inundate your "virtual friends" with photos of your dinner, cute cat memes, and political rants.

Most people have friends. Including virtual friends. But I wonder, do most people have "spiritual friends"? Are we open enough with our friends to share our spiritual selves? To speak of God? To use the language of our Christian faith? To ask for and to offer prayer? I wonder, do most people have "spiritual friends?" And I wonder what we are doing *in the church*, and what we could be doing *better in the church to cultivate spiritual friendships?*

In anticipation of his death, Jesus delivers a farewell address to his disciples in which he redefines his relationship with them. "I do not call you servants any longer...but I have called you friends." (John 15:15)

The conversation is a game changer. Before this moment, the disciples were... well... disciples. They were learners. Jesus was the teacher. They were followers. Jesus was the leader. They were servants. Jesus was the master.

But now all those roles go out the window. Now, Jesus calls them "friends." It is a big moment whenever a hierarchical relationship becomes egalitarian. I have a story about that.

My husband Carlos and I were friends for the longest time before we got married. We knew each other in high school and shared the same group of friends. We knew each others' parents. His parents were Mr. and Mrs. Monteagudo. Mine were Mr. and Mrs.

Boling, (although I found out much later than my mom was also known in certain circles as “The General!”)

Fast forward years later, both of us older and wiser enough to realize that we would like to marry each other. After we’d announced our engagement publicly, my parents sat us down on the couch in their living room one day for one of those “talks.”

“Now that you are getting married,” my mom (aka “The General”) said to Carlos, “we want you to stop calling us Mr. and Mrs. Boling. Instead, we want you to call us... Jean and Bob.”

Well, I think you could have picked Carlos up off the floor. *Jean and Bob?* If anything, I think Carlos was expecting them to invite him to call them Mom and Dad. I know Carlos would have preferred that. After all, they were *the parents*. But they wanted to be called Jean and Bob. And when you’re the son-in-law-to-be, you don’t get a vote. That day, sitting on my parents’ sofa, a hierarchical relationship became egalitarian. And it was shocking.

“No longer do I call you servants,” Jesus said to his...well...servants. “From now on, I call you friends.” In his game changing farewell discourse in John 15, Jesus redefines the relationship of his followers as a *friendship*. In biblical terms, this meant a relationship of reciprocal love, mutual regard and voluntary obligation.

And this speech of Jesus’ was directed to the group. I have called you friends, plural. The friends of Jesus are intended, naturally, to be friends with each other. Call me Captain Obvious, but the point here is that **people in the church ought to be friends with each other, *spiritual friends***.

In her book Models of God, Sallie McFague discusses the characteristics of friendship in biblical, theological terms. Friendship does not arise from necessity. We enter into it freely. As such it represents the very essence of divine election in which God chooses to enter into relationship of friendship with Israel. Friendship is based on a disinterested love for the unique characteristics of the other. Friendship forms strong bonds and the betrayal of a friend ranks as the most dastardly of deeds.¹

Jesus set the pattern for spiritual friendship. The core value of spiritual friendship in the Christian tradition also comes from something Jesus says in this same passage from John 15. “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you.” (John 15:14)

Friendship as defined by Jesus obliges friends to do more than send each other photos of their dinners, cute cat memes, and political rants. Friendship as defined by Jesus obliges friends to lay down their lives for each other. Jesus perfectly demonstrated this in carrying his own cross to his own death.

Most of us will not be asked to do anything nearly as difficult as that, but we are asked, routinely, to set aside ego for an other. We are asked, routinely, to go out of our way for someone else's sake. We are asked, routinely, to put down our own agenda in order to pay attention to someone urgently in need. We are asked to lay down money in the offering plate and give away our precious time to be present to others because any friend of Jesus counts as a friend of ours, too.

Most of us will not be asked to do anything nearly as difficult as Jesus was asked to do, but we are asked to orient ourselves outward and be prepared to bravely empty ourselves of whatever is needed by those whom Christ loves, particularly the poor, the forgotten and the suffering.

Any friend of Jesus counts as a friend of ours, too. So our friends are not just the like-minded people who share our values and whose company we enjoy. Any friend of Jesus counts as a friend of ours, and when we honestly believe that, neither we nor the church will ever be the same.

"You are *my* friends if you do what I command you... This is my commandment: that you love one another."

Cornell West famously said that "justice is what love looks like in public."² We have a pretty good idea of what it means to love one another in one-to-one relationships, or in small family or friendship units. It's not always easy, but we know what we're going for. Love is patient, kind, not jealous, nor boastful, nor arrogant, nor rude, etc. (1 Corinthians 13) The example of Jesus' self-emptying love is the pattern by which we model our love when we are at our aspirational best.

But the biblical witness is never limited to the personal, the interior, or one-to-one relationships. Every biblical principle has a public as well as a private dimension. The command that we love one another applies not just to the personal, interior and one-to-one relationships, but also to the public sphere.

The public face of Christian love is social justice. When we take actions to correct the root causes of suffering on a systems level, we are following the love commandment. When we sit back and do nothing to correct the root causes of suffering on a systems level, we passively condone the "system" and lend our support to the evils it engenders.

The church's historic opposition to slavery, its active role in the civil rights movement, and its stance against apartheid in South Africa are all examples of "going to scale" with the principles of spiritual friendship. Some of you will disagree with me, but I believe that the PCUSA's stance on marriage equality is another such example.

A new "Confession of Faith" written during the era of mounting opposition to apartheid in South Africa in the mid-1980s has just recently received the requisite number of affirmative votes from presbyteries across the country and will be added to our PCUSA Book of Confessions. Called the Belhar Confession, this document states far more

eloquently what I have just been trying to say about justice being the public face of Christian love and spiritual friendship.

Here is an excerpt that we read just last Sunday afternoon during the service of commissioning of the new chaplain of Bloomfield College, the Rev. Terri Ofori:

We believe that God has revealed himself as the one who wishes to bring about justice and true peace among people;

- *that God, in a world full of injustice and enmity, is in a special way the God of the destitute, the poor and the wronged...*
- *that God calls the church to follow him in this; for God brings justice to the oppressed and gives bread to the hungry...*
- *that God frees the prisoner and restores sight to the blind...*
- *that God supports the downtrodden, protects the stranger, helps orphans and widows and blocks the path of the ungodly...*
- *that for God pure and undefiled religion is to visit the orphans and the widows in their suffering...*
- *that God wishes to teach the church to do what is good and to seek the right...*
- *that the church must therefore stand by people in any form of suffering and need, which implies, among other things, that the church must witness against and strive against any form of injustice, so that justice may roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream...*
- *that the church as the possession of God must stand where the Lord stands, namely against injustice and with the wronged; that in following Christ the church must witness against all the powerful and privileged who selfishly seek their own interests and thus control and harm others...*

Therefore, we reject any ideology which would legitimate forms of injustice and any doctrine which is unwilling to resist such an ideology in the name of the gospel.³

This document in its entirety is now part of our Presbyterian Church (USA) Constitution and is now considered authoritative, alongside the Westminster Shorter Catechism, the Heidelberg Confession, the Apostles' Creed and the other historic creeds and confessions of the Reformed tradition.

The New Beginnings process invites us to look closely at our neighbors and ask what are their experiences of life? What is going well? What are their difficulties? Who does the system fail to serve? What are the justices issues of our community?

One of the ways we at the Church on the Green can demonstrate spiritual friendship with our neighbors is by seeking systemic solutions for systemic problems. We can, in Christian charity, give a man a fish, but wouldn't it be better to teach a man to fish? And wouldn't it be even better to teach an entire community to fish sustainably?

Jesus does not call us servants, in today's reading. He calls us friends. Any friend of Jesus is a friend of ours by extension. Look around. The people in this room are your spiritual friends. Together we are a network. And together we can do much more than click and share photos of our dinners, cat memes and political rants.

Together we can nurture and be nurtured in the ancient faith of the church as applied to the bewildering and rapidly changing circumstances of our day. Together we can strengthen individuals, families and communities with the transforming love of Jesus Christ. With spiritual friendship as our identity and spiritual friendship as our ideal, let's begin a new chapter in Christian history in Bloomfield!

To the glory of God. Amen.

~Ruth L. Boling

¹McFague, Sallie. Models of God. Fortress: Philadelphia, 1987

²West, Cornell. "A Love Supreme," in "The Occupied Wall Street Journal." Nov. 18, 2011. <http://occupiedmedia.us/2011/11/a-love-supreme/>

³Belhar Confession, Presbyterian Church (USA). <https://www.pcusa.org/resource/belhar-confession/>