

## A Chosen Friend

John 15:9-17

May 17, 2009

Jesus Christ regards us as his friends. He calls us to be his friends and thus to be friends of God's. That's radical, friends. It's a totally different interpretation about the kind of relationship that exists between God and us than what is commonly understood and often proclaimed or suggested.

Now, being regarded as a slave of God's wasn't all that negative an idea in Jesus' day. Being referred to as a slave or servant of God's wasn't something to be ashamed of. In fact, the expression was used about someone who had a perceived special relationship with God. It was used about such Biblical giants as Moses and Joshua and David. Even some of the early church leaders, like Paul and James, wrote about how they hoped they would be referred to, known as, a "servant of God."<sup>1</sup>

Although the translation we are most familiar with translates the term used in the original as "slave" and that is indeed one of the possible meanings, some Bible scholars suggest that really wasn't the intended use. They point out that the primary role Jesus played with his twelve followers was that of rabbi, teacher, spiritual master and that it was that traditional pattern of teacher-student that he was turning his back on – "you are now more to me than my students – you're my friends."<sup>2</sup>

It's going to be experienced many times in the coming weeks – students running up to favorite teachers at graduation or at their parties and exclaiming: "Mrs. Johnson, I want to thank you for all you've taught me." And the teacher smiling and offering: "Thanks, Sue, but now that you've graduated, you can call me Carol."<sup>3</sup> The change in the relationship from student-teacher to friends is a welcome one for both.

The point of the exchange is still the same, Christ's announcement of this new understanding of the relationship between God and us created in those who were listening to him that night in the Upper Room the night he was crucified – those closest to him – created in them an image of a much more accessible God than anyone had ever thought possible before.

Always before the relationship was understood to be this master-servant sort of thing: God's the creator, we're the created – God's the king, we're the subjects – God's the superior one, we're the inferior ones – God's up there, we're down here. The lines of separation were clearly drawn and clearly understood.

But, Jesus said, "That's not how it really is." The boundaries between God and us have been removed, broken down, cast aside, overcome, hurdled. *Friends* is the title of the relationship now. God needs no longer to be understood as some impersonal, off in heaven, somewhere out there being, looking down on us and ordering us around. Ours no longer needs to be a gazing into space seeking a God who is removed from us, ready to punish our every mistake. We no longer need to feel as though God doesn't want anything to do with our actual daily living, as if God doesn't understand, doesn't care about our excuses. We no longer have to perceive God as some distant stranger – master on high – but rather, as an intimate friend we are able to know and be in relationship with in the here and now.

"What does it mean to have Jesus as a friend – to have Jesus choose us to be friends of his?"

Call to mind for a few moments one of your closest friends. Think about the relationship you had or have with that person. Think about the ups and downs you've experienced together. If you were to extend that same kind of give and take to the relationship you have with Jesus Christ, what might that look like? "What would it look like if I truly understood that Jesus and I were friends?"

One of the first things that came into my mind has to do with the similar interests my friends and I have – the similar outlook on life we have. One of the things this passage and many others in the scriptures tell us is that Jesus was deeply interested in people – he cared about them, he loved them, he was concerned about them. He was deeply disturbed whenever they became a victim of sin – he loved them so much he gave his life for their salvation – he loves us so much he gave his life for our salvation.

Being a friend of someone's means that we're concerned about the things that concern them. What people on the outside of the early church noticed about those who followed Jesus was the way they cared for

one another – the way their love overflowed for one another. It still works that way. It's still what turns people's heads.

I can't tell you how often in membership classes people who are considering joining have shared that one of the reasons they were doing so was because of how impressed they were with the caring they saw going on among the members – the love and concern they see being expressed and performed – how welcomed they themselves felt.

"They'll Know We Are Christians by Our Love," isn't just a nice thought based on scripture. It's true. It turns heads. When we love one another, people notice. When people see others caring and supporting and affirming and encouraging – loving one another – they want to be part of that kind of community – that kind of community of faith.

There's so much in these brief verses that we could still consider: the idea that we are appointed to go and bear fruit – the idea that we will be given whatever we ask for in Jesus' name – the close relationship between this idea of our being Jesus' friend and his command that we should love one another – the idea that Jesus is the source of information about God – the idea that we are friends and thus are entitled to know God's business – the challenge before us that we should be ready to, plan on, laying down our lives for our friends.

But the phrase that caught my eye several weeks ago when I chose the title for today's sermon is one that is not as familiar as the numerous phrases we've heard time and time again through the years that have their home in today's text – the "As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you...;" the "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you;" the "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends;" the "I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends..." It's hard to believe that so many well-known and oft repeated phrases are all in one short passage or one sermon setting.

The phrase that caught my eye is a relative of the rest – it certainly gleams part of its meaning from an association with the rest – but there's no question it isn't as well known as the ones just mentioned. In my opinion that should not be the case. The phrase is, "You did not choose me but I chose you." I just think that is such an awesome thought. There's nothing any more powerful than knowing you are the recipient of someone else's love – that someone else cares about you/for you just because you are you – just because I am me.

In my view no one has described the beauty and depth of this concept better than Henri Nouwen did in his book Life of the Beloved. Nouwen was attempting in his book to make the spiritual life more real – understandable – to those not involved in a religious life – a church or synagogue. Many of us who have read the book believe Nouwen failed, but accidentally succeeded writing a book for those on the journey.

His basic premise is that we are beloved by God – loved by God – first and foremost. The rest of his work is about how we come to understand ourselves – accept ourselves – to be in this relationship with God. And the first concept he offered is this idea that we are "taken" or "chosen" by God. In one paragraph in this chapter he observes (and remember he is writing this somewhat like a letter to a friend): "When I know that I am chosen, I know that I have been seen as a special person. Someone has noticed me in my uniqueness and has expressed a desire to know me, to come closer to me, to love me. When I write to you that, as the Beloved, we are God's chosen ones, I mean that we have been seen by God from all eternity and seen as unique, special, precious beings. It is very hard for me to express well the depth of meaning the word 'chosen' has for me, but I hope you are willing to listen to me from within. From all eternity, long before you were born and became a part of history, you existed in God's heart. Long before your parents admired you or your friends acknowledged your gifts or your teachers, colleagues and employers encouraged you, you were already 'chosen.' The eyes of love had seen you as precious, as of infinite beauty, as of eternal value. When love chooses, it chooses with a perfect sensitivity for the unique beauty of the chosen one, and it chooses without making anyone else feel excluded."<sup>4</sup>

We dare not miss his final sentence – this isn't about being chosen over against someone else, over against everyone else or anyone else. Being chosen by God doesn't mean that other people don't get chosen by God. The kind of being chosen Nouwen has in mind here is a kind that causes others to be included rather than excluded. It's not that God makes a competitive choice but a compassionate one.<sup>5</sup>

We are all chosen – every one of us – and the fact that all of us are chosen does not need to diminish the importance – the remarkableness – of the reality that we are chosen.

There's so much more that we could say, that we need to say, but for now we simply need to allow there to be space for us to be healed of our self-doubt, our guilt, our low self-esteem and bask in the sunlight of warm love that accompanies the fact that God loves us – that God chooses us. “Our preciousness, uniqueness and individuality are not given to us by those who meet us in clock-time – our brief chronological existence,” wrote Nouwen, “but by the One who has chosen us with an everlasting love, a love that existed from all eternity and will last through all eternity.”<sup>6</sup> We are each one “precious in God's eyes, called the Beloved from all eternity and held safe in an everlasting embrace.”<sup>7</sup>

A chosen friend – that's who we are – Christ's brothers and sisters – children of God.

Let us pray.

1. William Barclay, The Gospel of John: Volume 2 (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1956), p. 207.
2. HomileticsOnline, “Love Covers” (Communication Resources, Inc., 5/8/94), p. 3 of 8.
3. Clayton J. Schmit, “Surprised by Joy,” Pulpit Resource, April, May, June 2003, p. 39.
4. Henri J. M. Nouwen, Life of the Beloved (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1995), p. 45.
5. Ibid., pp. 46-47.
6. Ibid. p. 49.
7. Ibid. p. 49.