

Sixth Sunday of Easter  
The Reverend Nancy R. Easton

Sunday, May 17, 2009  
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Acts 10:44-48; Psalm 98;  
1 John 5:1-6; John 15:9-17

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

It's that time of the year – the time for high school yearbooks to arrive and be distributed and be scribbled in with notes of remembrance and friendship. I kept my set of yearbooks from my years at Ridgway High School, but I must admit while they provide me with memories of those years, they mostly provide my children with constant amusement – my hairstyles, the huge and thick glasses that I wore back then, and the fashions of the mid-1970's offer my kids a hearty laugh. And I laugh with them. Usually.

I brought along the yearbook from my senior year. Various classmates wrote in the pages and scribbled their thoughts, and almost to a person, they used these acronyms: RMA and AFA. I don't know that current high schoolers use those acronyms, but my generation did. RMA meant "remember me always" and AFA meant "a friend always."

So I'm paging through the yearbook and come upon a writing from Sue: "Nancy, may your dreams be as deep as the ocean and your sorrows as light as a feather. I really hope that all your dreams come true, and I know they will. Best of luck. Stay as nice as you are . . . you'll go far. Best wishes always, Sue. P.S.: I hope you'll always be my friend. RMA AFA"

Trouble is, I can't remember who Sue is. I've been looking through those pictures and trying to figure it out. But then again, she may not remember me, either.

Such is the elusive quality of friendship. It can be fleeting as friends go on to new ventures in their lives and they just drift apart. Friendships can be torn asunder by anger and betrayal. Friendships can wither through indifference and a lack of nurturing over time.

While I didn't bring my college yearbooks, I could have. And had I brought my senior year college yearbook, I would have shown you a photograph of myself with my friend Donna. Donna and I have kept a friendship going, although we have not seen each other since her wedding day in 1983. Actually she was going to visit me this weekend, and she could have been my sermon illustration. I would have said, "Donna, stand up – you're my one friend!" She was going to visit in the area on a business trip, but the business trip was canceled due to the economy, so it may be a while before I see Donna again.

Yet that elusive thing of friendship was maintained through snail mail, and then email, and the occasional phone call. This was not constant communication; rather it was intermittent, at best. But she was so kind and helpful to me two years ago when my mother was seriously ill and my father was temporarily placed in a nursing home. And I listened to her a few years back when she wrestled over the dissolution of her marriage and a faith crisis.

Friendships – deep and abiding friendships – they are rare and thus they are precious. And that's why I wouldn't want us to overlook Jesus' words here to His disciples, to His friends, in our gospel

reading. Jesus was preparing His disciples for His leaving them. He was preparing them for His death, and His resurrection, and His ascension. He was preparing them to be the Church, to be His hands and His feet and His heart when He was no longer with them. And so here He offers words of care and wisdom and encouragement to those who are going to carry on His tasks after Him.

And one of the ways that Jesus prepares them is by declaring to them the kind of relationship they have with Him. Jesus says, “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 because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father”.

This declaration of their being His friends is not one we ought to take lightly. Jesus doesn’t offer these words carelessly; this is a crucial shift in His language because He moves from a word that meant “servant” (in fact it actually meant “slave”) and instead moves to a word that expressed this love that flows in the mutuality of friendship. That’s a critical move. And it was very radical in that time period. Socialists, scholars, and historians say that a lot of relationships in antiquity were not co-equal; they weren’t based in this kind of manner. The relationships at the time of the earthly Jesus and the earliest Christians was not one of egalitarianism, it would be rather hierarchical in structure; the terms would be closer to “patron” and “client.” One party in the relationship was always more powerful, was the dominant figure; the other party in the relationship was usually subordinate, less powerful. New Testament scripture – not just our Gospel lesson today, but a lot of New Testament scripture – constantly criticizes this kind of patronage system, this kind of power-wielding relationships and says this is not the way Christians are to be and, in fact, is part of our human sinfulness.

So what we learn from Jesus today, is that Jesus chose His disciples and then He determined to make them His friends. This is His initiating; this is all His doing. And we discover here that Jesus can call them friends because He shared everything with them. He has not withheld anything from them. He has been honest with them about who He is; He has been honest with them about God the Father; and He has been honest with them about truth and goodness and faithful discipleship living.

Face it – if you want to hold power over someone, if you want to dominate – withhold information from them. That’s how you have power over someone, isn’t it? But our Lord Jesus did not do that. He withholds nothing from His disciples; He doesn’t even withhold His own life – He gives of Himself, completely! And so the irony is that Jesus is both discussing and describing the model of friendship, but also servanthood. This aligns with something I read in a recent issue of *The Christian Century*, the author, Bill O’Brien, said “While it is possible to be a servant without being a friend, it is impossible to be a true friend and not be a servant. Christ gave us a new command: to love each other as he has loved us.”

And of course that’s where it becomes difficult. Jesus declared to His disciples that they were His friends, and in the same breath He commanded them to love one another as He has loved them. So they are to be to each other as friends the way Jesus is their friend.

I’m grateful that Jesus would call me His friend, and it’s easy to love Jesus as a friend because of all Jesus has done for me. But now, to love the rest of this church in the way He has called us, to see everyone else as a friend? That’s a different story; that’s expecting a lot from us. But Jesus issues this command over and over again in John’s Gospel.

We have our own issues in this generation, our own patronage systems of sorts. Life in a faith community ain't all so sweet. Every congregation has people in it who dominate, who wield power by withholding information, who enjoy being in the know and letting other people know they are *not* in the know. Every congregation sorts itself out as people with higher status and people with lower, people with more influence and people with less influence; every congregation has some tightly closed cliques that exclude the outsider. Some of us here might not have had any of those experiences in this congregation. But I tell you there are always people in every congregation who, if you ask them to be honest, will tell you that they have felt excluded, their ideas disregarded, their gifts of service criticized, their life circumstances judged, their presence not wanted. As the pastor of a congregation, I'll either be the last person to know about it or I'll be the first person, and I'll wonder and worry what to do next.

I suppose we can think our Lord is presenting us with a nearly insurmountable challenge: this notion of loving one another as friends in Christ, a friendship that consists of mutual care and commitment. We might attempt to do it simply out of a sense of obligation. Or we might not even attempt such loving at all. But it seems to me that if Jesus has initiated this particular type of relationship with us, if He has declared us to be His friends, if He has asked us to be likewise with one another, and then has promised that anything we ask God the Father in His name we will receive – then we ought to pray to God that He would help us live as the friends Jesus has called us all to be.

We have some interesting years ahead of us here at Trinity. We will be making the very slow but steady transition from the retirement of our Senior Pastor Stew Hardy in January, to the ministry of an Interim Senior Pastor for a time, to the eventual call of a new Senior Pastor at Trinity – there will be all sorts of tasks to take up to help Trinity during this time, while we remain focused on our many ministries and on our mission in this place. But the greatest responsibility, and the most challenging task we face, is faithfully answering Jesus' call that we love one another in this community as He has loved us. Nothing will hinder Trinity more than the lack of that mutuality of friendship. And nothing will take Trinity further than the sheer power of the care and the nurturing and the up-building that we do for each other – every single one of us.

RMA. AFA. You know, those are acronyms well suited to our Christian worship. When I preside at the communion meal in a few minutes, I'll say words that Jesus said to his closest friends nearly two thousand years ago, and these words I'll say as I lift up the bread and the cup: "Do this for the remembrance of me." And then together, you and I will share in His loving presence, and together we will receive His loving, life-granting power, once more, because He is our friend. Always.

Amen.