

Epworth Chapel on the Green
May 25, 2014
Easter 6
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Acts 17:22-31
Psalm 148:7-14
I Peter 3:8-18
John 15:1-17

I've heard many sermons from John 15, and preached a few myself. I've preached about Jesus' familiar words, "abide in me." And I've preached about Jesus' well-known command : "love one another, as I have loved you."

However, I have never attempted a sermon from the latter portion of this text, especially verses 15-16 where Jesus says: "I no longer call you *servants*, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you *friends*, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you."

I have always steered clear of these words of Jesus. I'm not sure why, because it seems like an attractive and even pleasant text to preach. To be called a friend of Jesus seems like an incomparable gift.

But then this week I remembered something that happened many years ago while I was a doctoral student. I encountered part of a sermon given by an elderly African-American preacher. His text was James 2:23, which says: "Abraham was a friend of God."

I don't remember much about the sermon, but I remember the preacher saying: "Abraham was a friend of God – but I'm sure glad *I'm* not a friend of God."

I have asked myself this week, especially after reading Jesus' words here in John 15, "Why would anyone say that?"

When Jesus says, "I no longer call you *servants*, but *friends*," why would anyone bristle at that? Isn't going from a servant to a friend a step up, a promotion of sorts?

Think of it: out of the cabin and into the big house. Off the back porch and onto the patio. Off of the floor and into the big bed. No more, "tote that barge, lift that bale." Instead the words, "come, friend, let us walk together."

Jesus says, "I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know his master's business." There is much truth in that.

I read a story once of a man who had spent most of his life as a servant to a wealthy landowner and businessman, and he said:

The whole of my life and experience was to do what I was told. Plough, plant, weed, and harvest, that is what I did when told to do it. I did not know what went on in the boss' head. I did not know what went on in the big house. Deals, trades, profit and loss – those were his responsibilities, not mine. When my day's work was done, it was done. After that it was bread and bed for me. Folks didn't ask me any questions about my boss' business. I didn't know. I minded my own business.

So for Jesus to say, “You’re no longer *servants*, but *friends*,” that’s like a promotion, right? That’s a change in status, right? That’s a change in the relationship, right?

Indeed it is. Jesus says, “I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father.”

It appears from Jesus’ words here that friends of his now share in the knowledge of what God is doing, and how God is doing it. God is creating a community of love that is to embrace all people. A *friend* has this love and extends it toward others.

But this comes at a price. The world that does not know God will hate the friend of Jesus, as it hated Jesus, for practicing this love. Jesus paid the full price for loving in this way, and we have no reason to assume that friends of Jesus will be exempt from the same fate.

When Jesus brings people on board as friends and shares with them what God is doing, *those friends now share the responsibility of that knowledge*. Think about this. If the servant becomes the *friend* of the master, **then the master’s burdens become the servant’s burdens**. Friends of Jesus are now no longer free of the duty to bear the fruit and to pay the full price of love. It is a wonderful thing to sing the old hymn, “What a Friend We Have in Jesus.” But the

notion of “What a Friend Jesus Has in Me,” is beginning to feel a bit burdensome. Are we sure that becoming a friend of Jesus is really a promotion?

Think about it. Jesus says, “You are now my friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father.”

I’m not sure I’m ready for that. Seriously, do you really want to know everything? In some areas of my life, I prefer to remain deliberately ignorant.

For example, as a child I carried images in my mind of General George Washington with his troops at Valley Forge, braving the brutal winter conditions. Stories of men dying in the extreme cold were part of the lore. Then I remember what I felt like when I learned the truth that Washington was quartered in a large, comfortable farm house nearby while these soldiers were freezing and dying.

I’m not sure I want to know absolutely everything. Do I really want to hear a poor child say, “mommy, I’m hungry, and then a few minutes later drive by a restaurant marquee that says: ‘All You Can Eat, \$10.95?’”

Some time ago I heard a passionate and informed speaker describing how 13 million children in America go to bed hungry every night, over 10 million children don’t have health insurance, and every 30 minutes a child is shot to death in the United States. Honestly, there is a lot of information that I prefer *not* to know.

But to be a friend of Jesus is to be brought into the inner circle, to be made aware of what God is doing, to participate with God in what God is doing. And

with that comes the uncomfortable truth that carries with it unavoidable duty – the duty to love, to lay down my life. If *this* is friendship, then the life of a servant is looking more attractive all the time.

In my home church in Nebraska, I remember the first time I ever saw the inside of a pulpit. The pulpit in my church was a crafted and carved wood pulpit, made from Mahogany. It was a stunning piece.

But I remember the first time I was asked to preach. I remember sitting in my seat prior to getting up to preach, looking at the inside of that pulpit. There was an old hymnal with the cover ripped off. There was an open book of matches, and some individual matches already burned. There were some old, marked up sermon notes. There was a smattering of coins, and a couple of old AA batteries, a burned up candle, and an old empty coffee cup.

Needless to say, the view from the pew was much more attractive to me than where I now sat. In that moment, I did not feel like I had been given a promotion. And since that time, there have been plenty of days when being a *servant* has been more appealing than being a *friend*.

Jesus says, “I no longer call you servants, but *friends*, because I’m bringing you into the inner circle of what God is doing.” But let me ask you, in all seriousness: *Do you really want that? Are you prepared for what that might mean? Are you sure you want to come out of the barn and into the big house?*

In the chapter prior to this one in John's Gospel, Jesus says that in his Father's house there are many rooms. I had a dream some time ago, and in that dream I was invited to spend a night in God's house – the "big house."

I was so excited. It was my first visit to the house of many rooms. When I arrived, angels greeted me and showed me around and answered all of my questions. The food was incredible. The atmosphere was indescribable. Then at one point I was escorted to my room. With a "good night, sleep well," I was left to be alone.

The excitement of the day finally turned into weariness, and weariness into rest. My bed was a cloud. I slowly drifted off to sleep. But sometime during the night I was awakened, and I could hear strange sounds coming from the room next to mine. I did not know who was in that room, but whoever it was he or she was having a very bad night.

I could hear what sounded like agonizing moaning. At times, there was what sounded like violent tossing and turning, and at times I thought I heard what sounded like footsteps pacing the floor. I got up and put my ear to the wall, but I was afraid to call out, because I didn't want to add to the person's discomfort, and I didn't want to wake anyone else. So I laid awake in my bed until the morning, trying to snatch a bit of sleep here and there.

At daybreak I heard the person next door move about the room and then step out into the hall. I quickly got up and went to my door. I wanted to see who it was, and if possible, to express my regret for the night going so badly.

When I opened my door and peeked out into the hall, I could not believe my eyes. There, looking back at me, was God. I was shocked. Isn't God the One who gives peace that passes understanding? Isn't He the One who blesses and calms even a whimpering child? Yet there He was, restless, unable to sleep.

God said, "I'm sorry if I disturbed your sleep. I know my groaning was a disturbance. But I can't get my mind off of all my hurting children down there."

I have long since awakened from my dream. And I remembered this week that African-American preacher, and the words to the end of his sermon. As we come to the Lord's Table this morning, I share what he said with all of you. He said: "If you find yourself being drawn into Jesus' inner circle, being called a *friend* of God, you are incredibly blessed and fortunate. But pray for the strength to bear the burden of it."

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.