

The Sixth Sunday of Easter  
May 6, 2018  
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Trinity Episcopal Church, Bend

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

Back in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Teresa of Ávila, a Carmelite nun, often traveled across Spain to tend to the convents she organized. On one occasion, she was knocked off her donkey and fell into the mud, injuring herself in the process. She complained to God, saying: "You couldn't have picked a worse time for this to happen. Why would you let this happen?"

And the response she heard was, "That is how I treat my friends."

To which Teresa answered, "And that is why you have so few friends!"

In our gospel this morning, speaks to his disciples, telling them he thinks of them as his friends:

*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's the distinctive point for us to consider this morning: Jesus calls them – and by extension, us too – his friends.

It's a point for us always to remember. It doesn't mean we've got it all figured out. It doesn't mean we're perfect, far from it. It doesn't mean we're better or smarter or more spiritual than anyone else. It just means we've been told who we are ... and so we should remember always that we are, first and foremost, loved by God, and never asked to face anything alone.

But it doesn't mean life will always be easy. It is also a discomfiting challenge, because Jesus insists that his friends will love one another ... and not on our own terms, but on his. Jesus doesn't encourage us merely to love one another as we see fit; rather emphatically he adds five little words: "love one another," he commands, "*as I have loved you.*"

It's no small point that he says this during the "Last Supper." On the eve of his crucifixion, Jesus says, "love one another as I have loved you."

But Jesus had already shown them that love earlier that same evening. When he first commanded them to love one another, he got down on his knees to wash his disciples' feet. He literally stripped away all privilege in order to love them.

Peter was one of those there that night. Peter promised to be a reliable friend, staying with Jesus to the end, but couldn't be trusted. He abandoned Jesus first chance he got. He denied even knowing him later that night.

And it wasn't just Peter. They were, all of them unlovable in their petty (and not-so-petty ways). James and John were there, always competing for positions of honor in the kingdom of their imaginations. Thomas – outspoken, sometimes crass – was there. Women and children, too, presumably, though they are not mentioned explicitly in the gospel accounts (presumably because they were never as vexing as the men were). Jesus stooped down to show his love for them all, all the same.

And Judas was still there, as well. He would very shortly thereafter head out to betray Jesus, to set in motion the wheels that would crush him on a cross. But when Jesus stooped down to wash the disciples' feet, Judas was still there among them. And Jesus – knowing what Judas was set to do next – washed his feet, too, showing his love for him.

Of course, that was the pattern of the whole of Jesus' life and ministry. He was always breaking bread with all sorts – the deserving and the undeserving, the respectable and the disrespected. Looking back, it's clear that Jesus befriended an ever-widening circle of friends. That was the business of Jesus in life.

And it would become the business of Jesus' followers, his friends, thereafter. Jesus commanded them to love others as he loved them ... to make friends in the same reckless fashion he showed them. And that is what they did. That's what the whole of the Book of Acts is all about.

Last Sunday, we heard one story from Acts about one of Jesus' friends befriending a stranger. Our bishop was the preacher last Sunday. And he emphasized that Philip was sent to a black man who was also a eunuch. Issues race and racism, of gender identity and LGBTQ rights and inclusion, are all different for us today, but Bishop Pat asked us to notice that Philip, without any hesitation, invited a "castrated black man" into the ever-widening circle of Jesus' friends.

That was chapter eight of Acts. In chapter nine, a self-proclaimed enemy of the early Church, heads off to Damascus, authorized to arrest any followers of Jesus. But on the way, he's struck blind and has to be led by the hand to Damascus. Ananias, a disciple living in Damascus, is sent to tend to him. And in short order, Ananias invites this man, who would become known to us as Paul, into the ever-widening circle of Jesus' friends.

This morning, we heard part of the story about Cornelius, a Roman centurion. Cornelius asked Peter to talk to him about God. So Peter began to preach to him and his household. We don't actually get the sermon this morning. We start with the sermon already in progress, but then – and this is actually kind of a delightful moment – then, "while Peter was still speaking," the Holy Spirit interrupts the sermon. So Peter orders the Roman congregation to be baptized into the ever-widening circle of Jesus' friends.

And nearly 2,000 years later, we realize that we have all been drawn into the circle of Jesus' friends ... and that it is still our calling to befriend others.

In last week's sermon, Bishop Pat told us a particularly horrifying story about modern racism and what a black priest says he saw happen in a predominantly white Episcopal church. He watched a black man come for communion, and when he presented himself there at the altar rail, the woman administering the chalice glared at him. And then she spit in the cup.

It's a terrible story, but it reminded me actually of a wonderful story. It's a story Michael Curry told in his sermon when he was installed as our Presiding Bishop.

It was sometime in the 1940s ... Segregation ... was still the law in much of the land and the actual practice [elsewhere]. ...

An African American couple went to an Episcopal church one Sunday morning. They were the only people of color there. The woman had become an Episcopalian after reading C.S. Lewis' *Mere Christianity*, finding the logic of his faith profoundly compelling. Her fiancé was then studying to become ordained as a Baptist preacher.

... When the time came for communion the woman, who was confirmed, went up to receive. The man, who had never been in an Episcopal Church ... stayed in his seat. As he watched how communion was done, he realized that everyone was drinking real wine — out of the same cup.

The man looked around the room, then he looked at his fiancée, then he sat back in the pew as if to say, "This ought to be interesting."

... Would the priest really give his fiancée communion from the common cup? Would the next person at the rail drink from that cup, after she did? ...

The priest came by speaking these words to each person as they drank from the cup: *The Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, which was shed for thee, preserve thy body and soul unto everlasting life. Drink this in remembrance that Christ's Blood was shed for thee, and be thankful.*

The people before her drank from the cup. *The Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ ...* The person right before her drank. *Drink this in remembrance that Christ's Blood was shed for thee....* Then she drank ... Now was the moment her fiancé was waiting for. Would the next person after her drink from that cup? He watched. The next person drank. *The Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, which was shed for thee ...* And on down the line it went, people drinking from the common cup after his fiancée, like this was the most normal thing in the world.

The man would later say that it was that reconciling experience of Christ in the sacrament of the Eucharist that brought him into The Episcopal Church ... He said, "Any Church in which blacks and whites drink out of the same cup knows something about the Gospel that I want to be a part of." <sup>i</sup>

That man and that woman would later marry. And one of their children, none other than Michael Curry himself, would grow up to be the first African American Presiding Bishop of a still predominantly white Episcopal Church.

And one of Michael Curry's chief concerns has always been to call on us to do what, in this morning's gospel, Jesus commands us to do, to love one another as he loves us, and what Jesus invites us to do, as well, to invite others into that ever-widening fellowship of Jesus' friends.

I opened with a story about Teresa of Ávila. Let me close with what are perhaps the most famous words attributed to her:

Christ has no body now but yours.  
No hands, no feet on earth but yours.  
Yours are the eyes through which  
    he looks compassion on this world.  
Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good.  
Yours are the hands through which he blesses all the world.  
Yours are the hands, yours are the feet,  
yours are the eyes, you are his body.  
Christ has no body now on earth but yours.<sup>ii</sup>

*... dear friends.*

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<sup>i</sup> Michael Curry @ <https://www.episcopalchurch.org/posts/michaelcurry/sermon-installation-27th-presiding-bishop>.

<sup>ii</sup> Teresa of Ávila @ <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/66880-christ-has-no-body-now-but-yours-no-hands-no>.