

Sermon by Rev. Dr. Michael J. Hoyt
Glenshaw Presbyterian Church
Sixth Sunday of Easter
May 21, 2006

Friends in Christ

John 15:9-17

When we baptize a child, as we have just done for Tessa,
we reaffirm our commitment to her,
as a *child* of God,
and, therefore, a member of the *household* of God,
and our *sister* in Christ.

We affirm that we all belong to the same *family* in Christ.
And this is how we often talk about our new relationship in Christ:
as brothers and sisters in Christ,
we belong together with a newer and greater bond;
now, by the waters of baptism,
we are stuck with each other...like family.

But this morning, Jesus talks about our relationships differently.
Today, Jesus would have us consider what it means to be
not *family*, but *friends*, in Christ.

* * * * *

Who's heard of the saying "blood is thicker than water"?

[GoEnglish.com gives the following explanation of this idiom]

"People in the same family are related by **blood**
and "**blood is thicker than water**" says that family ("**blood**") relations
are more important than relations with friends.

Example: "When my best friend and my brother got in a fight
I had to help my brother; **blood is thicker than water.**"

"**Blood is thicker than water**" compares
the thickness of **blood** (family relationship)
to the thickness of **water** (friendships)
and says that our family relations are more important ("**thicker**")
than all others.

Another Example: "Friends will come and friends will go
but your family is always there for you;
blood is thicker than water."

Jesus, however, says this:

No one has greater love than this,

to lay down one's life for one's friends.

Then, addressing his disciples, he says,

You are my friends, if you do what I command you.

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 learned from my Father.*

On first hearing, it might seem that Jesus is saying,

"I will let you be my friend if you do what I want."

The kind of thing you might hear come out of the mouth of a pre-schooler.

But it's deeper than that.

When Jesus says *if you do what I command you*,

he is not setting a condition of his friendship to us;
his friendship to us is already established.

Jesus is the One who lays down his life for his friends;

that is, he demonstrates *the greatest possible love for his friends.*

Moreover, he says to us: *I have called you friends.*

It's not that we're just hanging around Jesus because he's popular
and we're hoping he'll take notice of us and invite us to the party.

Jesus has already declared his friendship to us.

Jesus says: *You did not choose me, but I chose you.*

This is not meant to be some statement on predestination
or suggest in any way that God robs us of our free will.

What this means is that Jesus' love for us comes first,

apart from our ability to "win friends and influence people."

Jesus *is* our friend, regardless of how we respond.

Now, resting in that bedrock assurance,

If we want to demonstrate our friendship to Christ in return,

then we will do what he commands us:

which is nothing more (and nothing less)

than to *love*, as he has first loved us.

And what if we don't? What if we don't return Jesus' love?

What if Jesus' love for us, God's love for us,

becomes an "unrequited love"

an unreturned friendship?

Well, Jesus' isn't going away; Jesus still will not turn his back on us;

because, unlike the old idiom,

in God's economy of friendship,

"Water is thicker than blood!"

We are baptized in the life-giving waters of the Font.
We are "Sealed by the Holy Spirit in baptism,
Marked as Christ's own forever."
God is stuck with us,
because God has chosen to be stuck with us.
Jesus *is* our friend, regardless of how we respond.

* * * * *

So, will we – will you and will I – respond?
Listen, once again, to your best friend revealing to you
his heart of hearts...
You are my friends, if you do what I command you.
This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.
I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.

As those who have been blessed with the friendship of Christ,
we are called to befriend one another with the same friendship.

* * * * *

So...what is Christian friendship?

First of all, it begins with the affirmation that,
contrary to conventional wisdom,
"Water is thicker than blood."
Or at least...water is *as thick as* blood,
since the water of baptism carries with it the same power
that was poured out for the world when Jesus' blood was spilled
on the cross...for all of us.

What that means is – like family – we are stuck with each other.
Can you think of a Christian friend you wish you weren't stuck with?
whom you'd like to be done with?

...Honestly, now...

Are there people in your sphere of relations whom you have sort of
written off?

You feel as if you've done as much as can be reasonably expected,
and since they are not willing or able to change,
you've decided you're done;
you've given up on them.

Well, sorry, but if you want to be Jesus' friend,

you can't do that.
If you want to demonstrate your love to Jesus,
you have to work at that relationship,
and find a place in your heart for that person.

(As always, when talking about these things,
it is important to say what I don't mean:
I do not mean you must put yourself in harms way,
by staying in a dangerous, abusive relationship.
But even from a place of safety, you have to work at loving that person.)

If the hurt in your relationship
has caused you such pain, resentment and bitterness
that every thought, every word, every deed toward that person
is thought, spoken and done out of anger,
then you have some *interior* work to do.

This is true whether the person from whom you are estranged
is a blood relation (that is, a biological family member)
or just a water relation (a fellow Christian, or a Friend in Christ).

To demonstrate your friendship to Christ,
is to do what he commands you:
love one another.

Find a place in your heart for this one whom Jesus loves.

But what about when friends become enemies?
Or what about enemies who were never friends to begin with?
And what if the person isn't even a Christian? Or hates Christians?
Since there is no common water of baptism with them,
we can't be friend in Christ, so we're off the hook!
Right?

Well, we know what Jesus said about enemies: *Love them.*

And, when it comes to non-Christians,
remember this:
when we are blessed by the waters of baptism
we are sealed by the same Spirit that moved over all creation
in the beginning,
we are marked as belonging to the cosmic Christ,
the agent of creation,
through whom all things were made in the beginning.

And so what if they are not believers today!

What is time to God?

When we encounter someone today,
for all we know they will be baptized tomorrow, or next year,
or in 50 years, or at the end of the age.

What is time to God?

Did God only start loving us when the water went on our heads?
Did God love Tessa one hour ago?

We are baptized into a universal love
that exists for us and for all
before the foundation of the world.

It's like we teach the children at LOGOS:

"Everyone *is to treat* everyone else as a child of God"

That doesn't mean everyone is a Christian,
but we sure better treat them that way,
lest we make the mistake of trying to know things
that only God can know.

(Those who know the One Rule of LOGOS, say it with me:

"Everyone is to treat everyone else as a child of God.
No one has the right to treat anyone else as if they do not matter.")

* * * * *

Here's the mental maneuver, the mind trick, or heart trick, if you will;

Here is a new way to think of those who have injured you,

a way that will change your heart:

The one you are having a hard time loving
because of what he or she has done
is not the one who has injured you.

They themselves have not done the thing,
but *the power of sin living in them* has done it.

They themselves, are created in the image of God,
and have been distorted, corrupted, manipulated
by the powers of darkness that bear down upon us all;
just as you have been; just as I have been.

We are in the same boat, you and him, you and her, you and I.

Don't take it personally, what they have done.

They weren't being their best selves.

See their words and deeds for what they are,
a corruption of the good soul Jesus loves.

a brokenness, a fragmentation, of the one Jesus has called friend.
It was so that his brokenness could be mended,
so that her fragmented heart could be made whole again,
that Jesus laid down his life for his friends.
Jesus sees and loves the good soul,
the true friend beneath the sin,
the silver beneath the tarnish,
the embers beneath the ash.

If we are willing to be the friends of Christ, by being friends in Christ
our relationships will be revolutionized, transformed.
If we are willing to be the friends of Christ, by being friends in Christ
then we will indeed bear the fruit that will last.

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