

Sermon for Sunday, May 6, 2018

Fruitful Friendship

Friendship is a powerful force in our lives. There are different kinds of friends, for sure. Some are not kept as close, they are more like acquaintances. Others are near and dear to our hearts, our best friends, our lifelong friends. Fairweather friends come and go, they ebb and flow with the changing tides that direct and re-direct our lives. Family friends make up yet another kind of loved ones we often give family titles like aunt or uncle, even though there is really not officially deserved.

John's Gospel shares with us another kind of friendship- friendship in Christ. We know Christ is a kind man who loves us, and calls each one of us into close relationship. The intimacy of this relationship allows us to conceive of our Lord as our friend. Our Lord and Savior is not some distant God who dwells in the clouds. Our Incarnate deity is supposed to be up close and personal- this is quintessential to the Christian message. We all learn this from a young age, most of us heard at some point in our Sunday schooling that Jesus is our friend! John's Gospel gives us a fuller account of what that friendship really means.

First, Jesus repeatedly tells us to abide in him in the preceding Gospel text about the true vine. Then we see this passage, where he begins to talk more about how we live instead of where we live. We live in Christ- that's the where; and we live in love- that is the how. Consequently, these two statements come part and parcel... how we live in Christ is very dependent on our understanding of where we dwell.

While Jesus is not exactly talking about the domiciles where we reside, there is still some information about households that we need to consider. Households and household codes were incredibly important to the fabric of the Israelite and Greco-Roman societies. Men kept households as a part of the patriarchal system, which meant women were kept; daughters and wives alike. Homes consisted of more than just the family- servants and slaves were woven into the tapestry of home life as well.

Just like the household norms in America today differ greatly from the same Biblical concepts, Greco-Roman slavery was also conceived of quite differently from the later American appropriation. In American slavery, there was a sort of "slave class." For servants in Biblical contexts, their class was determined by the class of their owner, the class of the household to which they belonged. According to sociologist Keith Hopkins, it was entirely possible and quite common for servants to work as "doctors, teachers, writers, accountants, agents, etc..."

Further, most slaves in American history were completely robbed of their freedom- they were forced into slavery by manpower or birth. Greco-Roman slaves often chose- of their own free will- to sell themselves into slavery. Servants were almost always guaranteed freedom after their service was complete. Manumission commonly took place at the age of 30 for servants, and citizenship was then granted to that person and their family.

What these differences highlight is how slavery and servitude in the biblical context functioned. The system, in most cases, offered promise of a future for the slave and their heirs. The aim was to gain citizenship or to climb the social ladder. If you were born into a lower class, the possibility of becoming a doctor in a higher class household was seen as an opportunity

to those seeking upward mobility. Otherwise servants were seeking security for their own families, with the hopes that one day they might establish their own households.

As a result, when we hear Christ inviting us to abide with him, we are hearing a call to those who have bought into the system either as masters or self-sold slaves. Jesus is urging those who have given power to oppressive systems to buy into another system, another household code... One run not by power, money, and might, but one run by Christ with love. Dwelling in the true vine demands that we live in the physical spaces of this world, all the while inhabiting a different space in the world with our being... A space that is distinctly Christian, truly friendly, loving, and free.

In our world, nothing is free. With the true vine, there is no such thing as earning potential, there is no opportunity to climb the ladder. Money is not our master. We may be held captive to systems of financial gain to secure our well being in this world, but that is not supposed to define the dwelling space of our hearts, minds and spirits. No matter where we reside, we can choose to live with Jesus. He is the friend that can always come to visit. He is under no guise as our master, he does not wish to rule us. His only request and his only need is that we live into the love he first gave us.

That is a constant choice. We can choose each new day and each new moment to renew our faith, to commit our hearts to Christ. Jesus invites us into the dwelling place where we are free from competition, but it is up to us to make that choice. This was a choice given for all people. Folks who had autonomy and those who did not. Kept women who were bought and sold as wives or servants were not given a voice in the ancient household system. Slaves who were not self- sold, but had their freedom stripped from them were locked into oppression with the key thrown away... all of these folks were given the power of choice. They could choose which "house" they wanted to remain within- one with a master, or one with a friend.

We can hear this same message today. The social locations we are inhabit, for most of us here at Ladue Chapel, come with privilege. Education, resources, and the like equip us to climb the ladder well. That is not always a choice. That is very often a result of the household you inherited from your family. It may not be all upwardly mobile- there are bound to be some fruits that do not last born of your family vineyard. There are downsides and complexities to privilege that are incredibly hard to endure, almost made more difficult by virtue of the perceived invincibility of the upper and upper/middle classes.

The sense of feeling trapped is a universal feeling. Jesus was preaching to the master and the slave at the same time. He was preaching freedom and friendship to the women and the men simultaneously. He knew that the powers that be were destructive for everyone; but he offered an alternative. That alternative is alive and well today.

Whether the household code is ancient and Greco-Roman, or modern and set in Ladue, Missouri, we all know that our masters can not rule our hearts... for then we will only ever bear fruit that fades. If we want to bear fruit that lasts, we are called to loose those ties that bind us to vines which trap us into love of selfish gain. When our hearts abide with the true vine, we have a new duty to fulfill- not to yet another master, but to our truest friend. We are called to grow, to blossom with love. Love that lays down its life, love that sets us free, love that completes our joy.

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