

**Sermon preached by The Rev. Charles Rowins at St. Christopher-by-the-Sea, Gibson Island, Maryland, 6<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter, May 6, 2018.**

In our gospel lesson this morning (**John 15:9-17**), Jesus tells the disciples that he is going to call them friends rather than servants. This is a pretty interesting development in the relationship of Jesus and his followers. From servant to friend. It's a kind of graduation. Not teacher and follower, but partners.

You might think that the disciples would consider this a promotion, a confirmation that the good job they had done as followers was being rewarded with a new title, an increase in pay, a corner office, more staff. But, alas, that's not what the "friend" designation meant.

The more the disciples thought about being a friend, a partner, the less enthusiastic they became. As a servant, they could simply walk away from the relationship if they thought that things were going south. We've been in servant roles, and walked away from some. I can get another servant job, maybe with better hours and better pay. Think of servant as "entry level." As a friend, though, the disciples owned the relationship. They were friends. They were partners. What happened to one happened to all.

Keep in mind that this passage is pre-arrest, pre-trial, pre-conviction, pre-crucifixion. If Jesus persisted in challenging the authorities, he would be in danger, and so would his friends. The authorities would look for those closest to Jesus, not those who were mere servants. So, while there might have been initial joy and pride in being "promoted," it didn't take long for the disciples to ask "Promoted to what?"

My guess is that we like the servant role. We enjoy doing things for people. We don't look for a reward greater than "Well done, good and faithful servant." That's enough for us. We're proud of that role. We're content with that role. We don't long to be friends with those in authority. We pour our energy into our work, not into a friend relationship with the boss.

Jesus designates the disciples as friends by making known to them everything that he has heard from his Father. He has shared with the disciples his relationship with God. He has brought them into the Inner Circle, as it were. And they, the disciples, didn't have a choice. Jesus just did this. "You did not choose me, but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last."

“Wait a minute,” you say. “I didn’t ask for this “friend” designation. I’m not sure if I even want it. Frankly I’ve got some questions about this whole business. I’m excited working for you, Jesus, but the Inner Circle is not what I bargained for. At least, give me some time to think about this new identity.”

We’ve been in this position, haven’t we? A sudden opportunity that came a lot quicker than we thought possible? An unexpected experimental medical option that might mean a turn for the better? An elevation to “friend” status with one who just might be the Messiah? Very tempting! And very tough to say “no” to. Remember these words of Jesus: “I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.”

These are tough decisions, and faced with these decisions, we instinctively ask for more time. But here, Jesus has already acted. The disciples are friends, with an arrest looming. We know that Judas, for example, wasn’t ready to commit. What we don’t know is whether he balked at the role of “friend,” or whether he took that role so seriously that he facilitated the arrest, knowing that this is what Jesus, his friend, wanted him to do, or perhaps even asked him to do. Either way, he ended up taking his own life. That’s a heavy price to pay for the “friend” designation.

In some way, however, the decision facing those first disciples – should I accept the friend label or be content with the servant label – is our decision. One cannot study Jesus of Nazareth without at some point coming to a sign in the road that reads. “Time to make up your mind.”

Servant-hood is a wonderful calling, and we’re trying our best to fulfill this calling. At some point, however, we might be called to the Upper Room and hear these words from the Lord himself: “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 heard from my Father. You did not choose me but I chose you. And now I appoint you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last.”

If this lesson feels like pressure, we don’t get much relief from our second lesson this morning, the First Epistle of John (**I John 5:1-6**). In fact, the author suggests that the commandments are not burdensome. “Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God, and everyone who loves the parent loves the child.”

The suggestion here is that keeping the commandments is a function of believing that Jesus is the Christ. But isn't keeping the commandments more than believing? Servants believe. Friends die for belief. Obedience from afar is doable. Obedience from the Cross is another matter altogether. Jesus doesn't post a "think about it" sign-up sheet. He posts a "who is ready to walk with me" sign-up sheet.

As challenging as this sign-up sheet might seem, we can be comforted that we are not alone. If we are ready to move from servant-hood to friend-hood, or even from "I'm not sure-hood" to servant-hood, we have company. We have the Holy Spirit. This is the message of the Acts of the Apostles (**Acts 10:44-48**). "While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word."

God engages us in a variety of ways, summarized by Father, Son and Holy Spirit, or, if you prefer, Creator, Savior and Sustainer. This three-prong engagement is designed to reach you and me in a manner we can handle. It's a big net, and somewhere in these three dimensions of God, you and I can find a reason to believe and to participate. If that belief and participation takes time, so be it. If servant-hood is as much as one can deal with at a given moment, so be it. God will provide other opportunities for belief, for obedience, for service, even for walking with the Lord to the Cross.

There is much that we do not understand. Enter today's Collect: O God, who has prepared for those who love thee such good things as pass man's understanding: Pour into our hearts such love toward thee, that we, loving thee in all things and above all things, may obtain thy promises, which exceed all that we can desire."

Today's Psalm (**Psalm 98**) reminds us that when we "sing to the Lord a new song," it is because the Lord "has done marvelous things." You and I can move from non-belief to curiosity to belief to servant-hood and maybe even to friend-hood. God is present at every stage, challenging us and guiding us and supporting us and thanking us and loving us.

It's not an easy journey. Never has been and never will be. But the journey is a lot more satisfying, even if more dangerous, than staying home. Being a good and faithful servant is a powerful witness, but even more powerful is being a friend.

Amen.