

Sermon for Sunday, May 5, 2024

Paula Papky for MacNeill Baptist Church

Acts 10:44-48

Psalm 98

1 John 5:1-6

John 15:9-17

### Friends of Jesus

This week I've been listening to a song by Darryl Adams, called "Friends of Jesus." It's kind of folksy, just his voice and a guitar. I was going to try singing it to you, this "Friend of Jesus" song. But it's been a busy week and I thought I'd have time to learn to play the guitar, but it just didn't happen. In fact, I didn't even have time to go and buy a guitar. So I'll sing just a bit of it a cappella.

*Jesus was a friend of John (hmmmm)*

*Jesus was a friend of Paul (hmmmm)*

*He was a friend of Matthew and James on down the line,*

*And I do believe I'd have been a friend of Jesus in his time.*

The song mentions the surprising friends of Jesus: harlots, hoodlums, gang members, people in dark streets...and it always repeats that last line, "And I do believe I'd have been a friend of Jesus in his time."

I'm not certain I can make that claim. Our Gospel lesson from John today holds some clues to what it means to be a "friend" of Jesus. It's a section of John's Gospel called "the farewell discourses." At this point in his ministry, Jesus is preparing the Twelve to carry on without him. He has to teach the twelve disciples to be attached to each other just as they have become deeply attached to him. Now, they don't want to face up to the fact that Jesus will die. He has to

keep on telling them what lies ahead. And he has to get them to trust each other, to love each other, after he is gone from them.

What Jesus desires is deep, unbreakable attachment. They are to be like family, defending each other and working for one another's good. Even dying for each other, as he will do for them. Their deep friendship will bring joy, he tells them. He says that together, they will bear much fruit. They will create joy.

Turning to our Acts lesson we find only four verses but throughout Acts we learn a lot about what being a friend of Jesus meant in the early church. In the early days, after Jesus' death, the Jesus group members – that is, the twelve and a small group of followers – continue their Sabbath customs at the Temple and obey Torah. But they also meet for worship on Sundays, the Day of Resurrection. Soon, a rift develops as the Jesus groups continue to preach in the Temple. It becomes harder and harder to hold on to faith in Jesus when so many who are Temple faithful refuse to hear of Jesus as Israel's Messiah. As well, some would-be followers are put off by the requirement of circumcision. Others regard the food rules as too restrictive. Some who are still entrenched in Greek and Roman culture are attracted but struggle with a religion that is based not on reason and rational argument but on a person who died in humiliation. And yet, in spite of obstacles, there are certainly converts in those early days. The Temple authorities sense they are losing control of who's in and who's out. Their tendency has always been to exclude where this new religious cult is devoted to inclusion.

Finally the Temple authorities arrest two ring-leaders, Peter and John. They order them not to speak in this name, this Jesus. In fact, they order them not to preach or teach at all.

But the friends of Jesus continue to speak of what they know. And the high priest orders the arrest and imprisonment of the Twelve. You may remember how perplexed and chagrined the officials were when, the next day, the Twelve have somehow slipped out of prison and are back in the Temple, teaching. And so, the Twelve are rounded up again, flogged, and then let go. The authorities don't know if they can get away with the wholesale slaughter of the friends of Jesus, and so they back off for a bit. And wait.

Then comes the story of Stephen in Acts 6 and 7. At the time, the Twelve have enough to do preaching and teaching in Jerusalem and so they appoint seven men to deal with daily problems that crop up, to lay hands on believers and settle arguments. Stephen is one of these seven. And when he tells the Jesus story to others he shows himself a friend of Jesus by criticizing the Temple and its strict obedience to the law, just as Jesus had criticized. They arrest Stephen for blasphemy, a capital offence. And Stephen becomes the first member of the Jesus group to be murdered.

As Luke records this scene in Acts, he describes how Saul (later called Paul) approves of the killing of Stephen. Luke writes, "That day a severe persecution begins against the church in Jerusalem and all except the twelve apostles are scattered through the countryside of Judea and Samaria." This section of Acts, following Stephen's death, is about the fledgling Jesus Groups fleeing Jerusalem, trying to stay together in little clusters throughout the Roman Empire: in Caesarea and Joppa on the Mediterranean coast; up in Antioch in Syria; to Ephesus, which is today's Turkey. Some Jesus followers end up in Samaria among

peoples long cut off from Jerusalem. We find in Acts small victories in all these places to which the Jesus groups flee to escape persecution by such as Saul.

There are, then, travel stories. You know the one in which Saul travels to Damascus with murder in his heart and on the way he meets the risen Christ and his life is profoundly changed. He is given a new name: Paul.

Peter, an Apostle, travels too. He travels over to the Mediterranean coast on the wilderness road, as an angel instructs him. And on the wilderness road he meets the Ethiopian eunuch, tells him the Jesus story and then baptizes him out there in the wilderness. The story is a little echo Jesus' own baptism by John in the wilderness.

It would seem from these stories and other, later stories, that if we are friends of Jesus we will need to be prepared to journey. Perhaps not in a literal sense, but still...we will need to take some wilderness roads, make our home on the edge of the sea, at the margins of life where there are always new discoveries, new ways of being faithful in the midst of change, even chaos. To be friends of Jesus, we will need to explore new ways of finding common ground with people who may have put some space between themselves and the church. but who might be willing to hear us if we shed some new light on the story, if we are able to reinterpret it for our own time; and if we are open to changing our own hearts and minds to include people. It's a question we are asking ourselves here at MacNeill as we journey down the road of reconciliation with Indigenous people, as we consider the future of our beloved church building.

The Peter and Cornelius story in Acts includes both travel and a meal. It takes place on the "edge of the world", as Luke puts it, on the edge of the

Mediterranean Sea. There Peter, the holy man, makes a startling discovery about what it means to be a friend of Jesus. Two people in this story have visions, an experience moderns feel skeptical about, even hostile towards. But in the ancient world, such events are commonplace, especially for a holy man like Peter; especially when he goes up to the roof, hungry and thirsty, to sit in the hot mid-day sun. He invites a vision, that's for sure. And he has one. He sees a sheet coming down like a tablecloth spread with all kinds of edible, animate creatures. God commands Peter to kill any of the creatures and eat them. Peter tries to argue with God – what about Leviticus? What about the food rules? I've never eaten shellfish or pigs' tails or locusts...and God reminds Peter who makes the rules. God made the rules long ago. And now God is making new rules.

Strangely, God is sending Peter to eat with a foreigner, Cornelius – another rule broken! Cornelius is a man who does not have roots in Israelite religion and yet, his heart is leaning toward Israel's God. By Torah standards such a one as Cornelius would be judged unclean. One could become polluted and unclean by sitting down at such a table and eating.

Cornelius too is given a vision, so he knows why Peter is there. Peter and Cornelius eat together because this is what God has arranged. It's as if this meeting between Cornelius and Peter reveals God's plan from the beginning: to deal with all human beings, not just Israel. The early Jesus groups in Jerusalem draw a circle around those who at least have Israelite roots. They believe they are sent only to the lost sheep of Israel. But God says, unh-unh; draw a bigger circle. All who honour me belong to me. Maybe you'd call that story the conversion of

Gentiles but perhaps it is also about the conversion of our own hearts to include more people than we once considered worthy to be friends of Jesus.

This is all back story for the 4 verses that form today's lectionary Acts lesson in which Peter perceives that the Holy Spirit is falling upon all who have opened their hearts to the Jesus story. The Spirit falls upon Cornelius and those with him, allowing them to speak in tongues, extolling God. It is with awe that Peter speaks of this transformation, out there on the edge of the world. Peter baptizes them in the name of Jesus Christ.

And so, who were the friends of Jesus? They were a frightened group fleeing persecution but empowered by the Holy Spirit. And because of that Spirit they were able to have a wider and wider understanding of just who God's people were. They were empowered, as we are, to heal, to speak boldly about Jesus, The Messiah. They were able to gather into families, meeting in houses, staying with people who had almost forgotten their roots, people long cast out. They were able to survive persecution, scattering, uncertainty, minority status, change and new rules because of the company of the risen Christ and of their loyalty to one another and to Jesus. All of this because Jesus said and is saying: "I no longer call you servants, but I have called you friends." And I do believe we are the friends of Jesus in our time.