

Love and Joy Among Friends

Acts 10: 44-48 John 15: 9-17

Last Sunday, I started off talking about clubs and churches, how churches aren't clubs, except they can look an awful lot like clubs in a variety of ways. I was reminded of Harvard professor Robert Putnam's book from 2000 entitled *Bowling Alone*. Putnam realized some interesting factoids, listed on the website bowlingalone.com [which I quote from directly below]. He discovered that over the previous 25 years, 58% fewer people attend club meetings, 43% fewer families have dinner together, and a 35% drop in having friends over to the house. That was 15 years ago. Do you think it's gotten any better in the last 15 years, recession and all?

Putnam showed how we have become increasingly disconnected from family, friends, neighbors, and our democratic structures. Putnam warns that our stock of social capital – the very fabric of our connections with each other, has plummeted, impoverishing our lives and communities.

His studies showed that we sign fewer petitions, belong to fewer organizations that meet – we can assume that includes churches – know our neighbors less, meet with friends less frequently, and even socialize with our families less often. We're even bowling alone. More Americans are bowling than ever before, but they are not bowling in leagues. Putnam showed how changes in work, family structure, age, suburban life, television, computers, women's roles and other factors have contributed to this decline.

Putnam's research at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government focuses on civic engagement, specifically social capital, and the impact and importance of social networks. [More from the website:]

*The term **social capital** emphasizes not just warm and cuddly feelings, but a wide variety of quite specific benefits that flow from the trust, reciprocity, information, and cooperation associated with social networks. Social capital creates value for the people who are connected and – at least sometimes – for bystanders as well. For instance, information flows (informal knowledge) depend on social capital. Or norms of reciprocity, of mutual aid, rely on social networks. Collective action depends upon social networks although collective action also can foster new networks. Finally, broader identities **and** solidarity are encouraged by social networks that help translate an "I" mentality into a "we" mentality.*

The importance of strength in social capital for a contemporary technological society is no different than from the rural, industrial society of 100 years ago. In fact, it may be more important. One thing seems evident: today's problems are very much about our poverty of social capital. Worse, there is remarkable indifference about this glaring weakness in our society. Who is talking about it? Who is motivated to do something about it? Why care when you have hundreds of Facebook "friends"?

In the passage from John's gospel, we pick up where the vine and the branches and the fruit of the vine left off last week. Bearing fruit as disciples means bearing the love of Christ, the sacrificial *agape* love that reflects the depth of Jesus' love for us. Jesus continues to talk about this special level of love, a love that Jesus reflects from his Father in heaven, and the level of love that Jesus wants to see reflected in his disciples.

While talking about the depth of sacrificial love, we may be surprised to hear joy as the related subject. **Sacrifice** and **joy** don't seem like concepts that belong together. Jesus is emphatic about this, calling for a love that lays down its life for **friends**.

This becomes the next theme, again with an odd mating of **sacrificial love** and **friends**. Clearly, this coupling of terms with different meanings and contexts requires some unpacking. The word used for "friends" is rendered in other translations as "beloved." That isn't used here in the New International Version (NIV) probably due to a sense that "beloved" suggested a more elite, more qualified group. "Friends" is inadequate, but "beloved" is inaccurate. Sometimes English doesn't give us a corresponding word; this is one of those times.

Jesus mentions *friendship* opposite *servanthood* or slavery. The servant or slave (it's the same word in Greek - *doulos*) does not know the business of his master (or **lord**), whereas a friend has been told everything.

There are further meanings to be drawn. It is not just knowing about the master's business, it also has to do with *caring* about what's known and what's needed. However, when it is *acting* like caring, but without love, it misses entirely. *Friendship* as Jesus uses it, expects that level of **love**, a level of caring and concern and compassion. This is an emotional investment that goes far beyond what a servant or slave would have.

We've probably all encountered or worked with people who didn't care to know why things were being done. They just wanted to get the job done and be finished with it. They didn't care about big pictures, strategies and processes, how this task was important, etc. "Tell me what to do and I'll do it. Don't bother me with details because frankly I don't care about all that other stuff." These people are servants. They do what they're told, and only if they're told to do it. They wouldn't know what to do if they weren't told, and wouldn't try to learn what was needed on their own. Frankly, they don't care that much. They're opposite the cherished friends to whom Jesus refers.

Jesus' friend knows exactly who his Master is, and feels privileged and joyful to be counted among the Master's friends in his fellowship. The friend is trying to figure out **how to do more** for the One who entrusted him with his enterprise.

The whole monologue comes full circle as Jesus closes this section returning to the terms of his relationship with them and the promise sealed in love, the bearing of fruit. *You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last.* His final words: *This my command: Love each other.*

Together, Christians are called to be witnesses to the love of Jesus, to bear fruit that will last. Jesus' preaching will continue in John, but we understand his message that relationships must be built in sacrificial love and incredible grace and heart-felt compassion, that relationships, friendships are the priority in loving witness. From such abundant love, a natural outcome is joy.

It may be tempting to read that passage from John, look at your existing circle of friends and relationships, like what we have here in this church, and believe that the Lord's mission has been accomplished in your life. "I have these excellent relationships and bonds that are akin to family in my church. This must be what the Lord was talking about." However, the reading from Acts pushes us outside that familiar circle as the Holy Spirit breaks that circle wide open to challenge the earliest church in its witness to the love of Jesus.

In the Acts reading, Peter has been preaching the gospel to a mixed congregation that included God-fearers, not unlike the Ethiopian eunuch from last week. In this reading, these are simply identified as non-Jews – Gentiles – who were excluded from full participation in the Jewish faith, but they attended synagogue anyway and praised God with the congregation, having faith in the God of the Jews.

Apparently Peter was still preaching when the Holy Spirit came upon the whole congregation, including the God-fearers. Peter and his Jewish company were shocked that non-Jews, people who were not really in the family of the faith, were receiving the Holy Spirit. This really messed up the whole game plan. As the big shot leaders in the Jerusalem church had determined, the good news was for the Jews first. The Gentiles were not really part of the plan **at all**.

Peter realizes that, despite their previous, clear understanding of how this should work - Jews only - he **has** to yield to the obvious message from God. As he sees it, he has no reasonable choice.

These new people were baptized on the spot and joined to the body of Jesus Christ. The closed circle that would only admit God's traditional people, the Jews, was coming apart at the seams in the earliest church. Jesus was going to have his faithful friends breaking through with whole new relationships, rooted in Jesus' sacrificial love and producing joy for all. The break with tradition and expectation that had already been taking place incrementally was taking on a new dimension.

Change was coming faster than the apostles could have imagined, and they weren't prepared for the new things God was doing. It would lead to problems and conflict and difficult times. But our Christian faith held together as the apostles recognized that their friend Jesus had surprised them once again. At the end of the day, their friendship with Jesus mattered more than any agendas or biases. If they had been servants only, they would have been annoyed by needing to change their plan and would never have reached for the new direction now before them.

One of the clear agenda items in the RACES study group that began among black and white church members last Sunday afternoon concerns the formation of meaningful relationships among participants. Indeed, one of the key findings emerging from the first discussion is the need for better relationships among people, the importance of basic respect, mutuality, understanding, and trust. Nothing can be expected to move forward positively in our community without such relationships with qualities of respect, mutuality, understanding and trust. That's building our community's social capital, and adding real value to our common life together. That's the kind of bridge-building and friendship-making that has not happened enough in our community, and oftentimes, not at all between the races, creating a social capital deficit that everyone simply accepted and ignored. Our community is not unique, of course, but neither is it immune.

Such friends in Christ's community share a bond that transcends the boundaries of mere acquaintance. It is where obligation is met with grace and transformed into gift. Friends are willing to extend themselves and make sacrifices. In that process, friends bring their mutual gifts together and produce joy for all.

May we recognize the power of relationships, of friendships in Christ, and hear our Lord's call to us to reach out to unfamiliar others and show them his promise of new life. Our witness of love and caring, of wanting to get to know and share with others is good for us, good for our community, and it happens to be the key to the mission of the Lord to which Jesus has called us together.