

## ARE YOU LOOKING FOR A FRIEND?

(08/06/2023)

Scripture Lesson: John 15:1-17

*“I do not call you servants any longer, . . . but I have called you friends.”* (John 15:15)

This morning, the first Sunday of the month, the Sunday when we observe or share in the Sacrament of Holy Communion, let us step aside from our exploration of Paul’s Letter to the Ephesians to return to something that Jesus said to his disciples in his last days here on earth in human form.

Looking back over the past three and a half years, as we all do from time to time, we remember or realize the many things we missed during the pandemic restrictions, restrictions that have finally been, for the most part, lifted. For those of us here in church this morning, and for those who may be reading this reflection online, we missed the opportunity to meet on Sunday mornings as the gathered church. We missed participating in our worship service. We missed Michael’s and Jim’s and also Linda’s beautiful organ and piano preludes and postludes. We missed our choir. We missed the opportunity to listen to the words of scripture and then to reflect on them, to attempt to discern their meaning, their message for our lives. We missed singing the hymns of our faith, powerful articulations of the faith of the composers.

And, of course, we missed our coffee hours! Earlier this summer, I emailed our regular attenders and asked them if we should continue to gather for coffee or tea and refreshments and fellowship downstairs in the vestry following our worship service even when our worship service began at 10:00 a.m. instead of 11:00. The response was overwhelming! Yes, we should!

This morning, we gather to observe, to share in, to partake of a very special sacrament—the Sacrament of Holy Communion.

On the first Sunday of every month, we celebrate the Sacrament of Holy Communion as the central focus of our worship service. This service is a reenactment of our Lord’s Last Supper with his disciples in the Upper Room on what we now call Maundy Thursday, his last meeting with them before his trial and crucifixion. It is one of the two sacraments that are celebrated in the Reformed Church tradition in which we stand: Infant and/or Adult Baptism and the Sacrament of Holy Communion. We regard these two dimensions of worship as sacramental because (1) it is recorded in scripture that Jesus did them, and (2) it is recorded that he asked his disciples and us to do them in his name or spirit.

The gathering on Maundy Thursday was the last time Jesus met with his disciples—at least in his human form. The meal, coming as it did at the beginning of Passover, is often

described as a Passover meal. However, this did not seem to have been a traditional Passover meal or seder. There is no mention of the lamb that is eaten at Passover, symbolizing the lamb's blood that was sprinkled on the doors of the Israelites' homes so the angel of death would pass over their houses. There is no mention of the bitter herbs that are symbolic of the suffering of the Israelites during their forty years in the wilderness. There is no mention of the unleavened bread that is eaten at the Passover meal to recall how, when the Israelites left Egypt, they did not have time to bring the yeast that makes the bread rise.

In our scriptures it is recorded that Jesus took a loaf of bread, gave thanks, broke it, and gave it to his disciples. I do not believe this was a Passover meal. I think it was Jesus' last meal, his last supper with his disciples. I think it had very little to do with the Jewish Passover. It was only later, when the gospel writers were trying to convince the Jews that Jesus was the Messiah for whom they longed that they tried to tie everything Jesus did to Old Testament prophecy and tradition. Quite frankly, some of these attempts seem to me to be a stretch.

The Last Supper is an important focal point of the gospels. It only makes sense that if this was Jesus' last meal with his disciples in his human form, the last time his little band would be gathered together, he would want to give them some final instructions. According to scripture, this is exactly what he did! He made certain predictions concerning what was to come. He continued his teaching about God and the kingdom of God. He explained why certain things were happening and why they had to happen the way they were happening. He shared the bread and the cup, symbolizing his body and blood, with them. He performed an act of humble service: he washed his disciples' feet. He gave them a new commandment: they should love one another as he loved them.

And he told them he had elevated them to a new status or level in their relationship: *they were no longer to regard themselves as servants or disciples but as friends.*

Since the members, friends, and visitors who worship with us come from different denominational backgrounds or religious traditions, let me clarify the matter of who may partake in the Sacrament of Holy Communion. In some Christian traditions, the priest is not allowed to serve anyone who is not a member in good standing in that church or in that denomination. The sacrament is reserved for those who are of that tradition, for those in the in-group, so to speak.

This is not the custom in our church. At the beginning of every communion service, during the Words of Invitation, I specifically state that this is the Lord's Table, it is not ours. Because it is the Lord's table, the Lord decides who is invited to the table. It is not up to me or up to us to decide who should sit at table with our Lord, who should partake of this sacrament. The decision is up to the Lord.

Instead of simplifying the matter, however, this makes it more complex. How do you know if Jesus is inviting you to sit at table with him? How do you know if you should observe, share in, or partake of this sacrament? I have a simple test. If you feel a desire to sit at table with our Lord, to draw closer to him, to experience his presence, to receive his body and blood, then your desire, the movement of your heart, the stirring of your spirit is telling you he has invited you. Your desire arises from an inner experience of Jesus reaching out to you, drawing you closer to him. It has nothing to do with your religious background or church membership. After all, as it is recorded in scripture, Jesus reached out to all kinds of people—people like you and me!

The invitation to participate in this sacrament also has nothing to do with the matter of being worthy. I don't like that word: "worthy," just like I don't like the word "deserve." I think both of these words lead us down a wrong path in our relationship with God. They leave out the element of grace, which I believe is a central dimension of our relationship with God. In the Words of Invitation, I make it clear that we come to this table not because we are strong, but because we are weak. We come not because we have any claim on heaven's rewards and the body and blood of Christ, but because we stand in constant need of God's help in our daily life, because we wish to experience the presence of our Lord and to share in the community of the people of God. We come out of our need. We come not because we deserve to break bread with our Lord, but because our Lord reaches out to us in this sacrament to draw us even closer to him and to God.

As I mentioned, this spirit of hospitality is not characteristic of all Christian denominations. Some apparently feel the need to protect the sacrament from people of other religious traditions, as if it were the sacrament, the bread and cup that is central and not the faith of the person who partakes. When we leave out the dimension of faith, we leave out that which not only transforms these elements but also transforms our lives. This exclusionary attitude, this splitting of the world into two groups--the in-group and the out-group, has an extensive and painful history. In Jesus' time, the Jews took this stance toward the matter of entry into the Temple in Jerusalem. The outermost courtyards of the Temple were open to Gentiles, to non-Jews. The inner enclosures were for Jews only, as indicated by one of the original Temple's remaining relics--a sign, in Greek, warning that any non-Jew passing further than that particular point "is answerable himself for his ensuing death." This is not our tradition!

It is no secret that I have a more than marginal propensity to focus on what I believe is Jesus' primary or central teaching about God, that God is like a loving father or parent. Jesus referred to God as *Abba*, which would be translated as *Daddy*, and he encourages us to pray and talk to God in these terms. If we are all children of God, all God's children, why would God

want to exclude any of us from this sanctuary, from this table, from this sacrament? No parent, no good or loving parent, would exclude one of his/her children from the house, from the table because the child was not “worthy.” A good parent doesn’t love and bless one of his/her children and curse or reject the others. As Jesus tells us (John 10:16), “I have other sheep which are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice.” The loving, accepting, healing, reconciling power of Christ extends way past those who are (often self-) designated as Christians.

Should you choose to gather with us around the Table of our Lord, I invite you to experience and then enter into a feeling of friendship and intimacy. The celebration of this sacrament in some religious traditions, e.g., the Roman Catholic, Anglican/Episcopal, and Lutheran is quite formal. I understand and appreciate the power of formality in liturgy, in worship, but I do not believe this is the only way to approach God, and it is certainly not our way or at least mine.

This reminds me of a joke that a Roman Catholic priest, a good friend of mine, told me several years ago. The priest had just been assigned a curate, an assistant to help him with the parish. The curate, the younger priest, was a stickler for liturgy; everything had to be done properly. He was always correcting the elder priest about what he did and said, about his hand movements, etc. while he was serving mass. The elder priest, to my mind, was one of the best priests, one of the best ministers I knew. My friend asked me if I knew the difference between a liturgist in his religious tradition and a terrorist who has taken hostages. The answer: you can always negotiate with a terrorist!

But that’s not the point. Getting back to the point, I have questions or doubts about the whole matter of worship, whether it is in keeping with Jesus’ teaching about God, and whether it is in keeping with the way Jesus encouraged his disciples, and us, to relate to him.

Webster gives us the following meanings of the word worship: (1) reverent honor and homage paid to God or a sacred personage, or to any object considered as sacred; and (2) formal or ceremonious rendering of such honor and homage. We are told that we meet here on Sunday morning to worship God. Many of our hymns speak to the attitude of worship. We are invited to adore God, to sing praises to God, to honor God, to give glory to God, to bring our tribute before God.

The metaphor that usually accompanies and gives rise to these injunctions is the metaphor of the king. If we think of God as a king, then the behavior that would be acceptable and required of those in the presence of a king is the behavior, the feelings that we are

encouraged to bring before God. However, this behavior and the feelings that attend this metaphor also shape our relationship with God.

Viewed within this context, worship could be seen as bringing something to God, as one would bring verbal or material tribute to a king. But does God really need our worship? Does God really need our praise? Does God need to be told that God is really big, really strong, really smart, and very creative? Does God need our adoration, our tribute? I know some kings (and one ex-president in particular) really like this kind of tribute, including the tribute that is brought in the form of material gifts. Remember, the only money kings had in olden times was provided, was given to them by the people of their realm. God is different! In fact, there is nothing we have that is not from God! There is nothing we can give to God because God has already given it all to us!

The God whom we encounter in the Old Testament apparently liked this kind of worship. He thought of himself as a king, a ruler, and he wanted to be thought of in this way. He liked the smell of sacrificial animal fat which was burned in the Temple as an offering to him. He describes himself as an angry and jealous God. He went out of his way to destroy those who did not believe in him, and he persecuted those of his followers who he believed were not faithful in their observance of the covenant.

Thanks to psychology, we know that the root of jealousy is insecurity. An insecure person needs to be constantly reassured and praised. An insecure parent needs or wants worship and absolute obedience, wants to be praised as a parent. An insecure or paranoid king (or ex-president) needs the constant assurance of the loyalty of his subjects. Anyone who disagrees with him becomes the enemy. Once again, psychology would describe this behavior as characteristic of a narcissistic personality disorder or, because of the use of splitting as a defense, a borderline personality disorder. I don't think either of these is a particularly helpful way to view the God that we experience in Jesus.

I don't think God needs our worship, our praise, our adoration. I think what God really wants is our love. I don't think Jesus needs our worship, our praise, our adoration. I think what Jesus really wants is our friendship. God and Jesus want us to live our lives fully, and they want to help us live our lives fully just as a good parent would try to help his/her children. They want to give to their children, not receive. In this sacrament, God through Jesus is giving us a resource for the living of our lives. It is freely offered to all of us, to anyone who desires to receive it. This is also the meaning of the Incarnation, which is not something that we gave to God, but something very special that God gave to us.

I know what you are going to say. You are going to say that when we worship God, when we praise or adore God, our worship invokes or evokes or brings out certain feelings within us. I agree. But what are the feelings that are brought out by a formal approach to worship? Are these more helpful than the feelings that are brought out by the invitation to sit at table with our Lord, to be with him, to talk with him person to person, to be his friend? If the goal of worship is to encounter God or be encountered by God, to be touched by God, to deepen our relationship with God, I personally feel more deeply touched when I think of God as friend than when I picture God as king. I know you can make a case for both. I am just encouraging you to consider the approach that Jesus opens up for us in the passage of scripture we heard this morning: the offer to be his friend.

As recorded in the Gospel of John, Jesus makes a significant statement to his disciples at the time of the Last Supper. He tells them they are no longer his servants, no longer beneath him. They are to regard themselves as his friends. Jesus didn't want his disciples to worship him. He wanted to teach them, to transform them. After he died, the disciples carried on his teaching and continued his healing, including the bringing back of people from the dead.

When you sit in silence during the Sacrament of Holy Communion, picture yourself sitting at table with our Lord. Enter into a conversation, an inner dialogue with Jesus. Be with him and let him be with you. Open yourself to him. Experience his presence with you, with us. Remember, he tells you that you are not his servant. He tells you that you are his friend and that he is your friend.

Then receive what he gives to you--his teaching, his body, his blood, and his presence as the Holy Spirit with you and within you always, even to the end of your days.

*A communion meditation shared by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson*

*The First Community Church of Southborough*

[www.firstcommunitychurch.com](http://www.firstcommunitychurch.com)

*August 6, 2023*

An audio version of this sermon will be posted on our church website later this week.

## **RESPONSE TO THE WORD: A CALL TO STEWARDSHIP**

The German priest, physician, religious poet, and mystic Angelus Silesius, who was born on December 25, 1624, has said,

*"Springtime is at hand.*

*When will you ever bloom, if not here and now?"*

Yes, this past week, as a respite from the oppressive heat, it felt as if springtime were at hand! With all the rain we have had this spring, and especially this summer, we are surrounded by green. Lawns are green, not brown. Crops, at least where they have not been flooded out, are

bursting forth from fertile ground. I love to listen to the songs of birds when I walk our dog in the early morning hours.

Angelus Silesius reminds us that springtime, the time of new life and growth does not only happen around us; it can also happen within us. It is not only a season of the year; it is a season of our lives. He reminds us that, like the flowers, we, too, are called to bloom. He challenges us when he says, “When will you ever bloom, if not here and now?”

We are called to bloom—here and now! Our stewardship, the stewardship of our time, talent, and treasure, the stewardship of our many gifts, our many resources as individuals and as a church—this is how we bloom!

Our pledge to the church, our gifts, the support of our mission outreach, are all like the fragrance that flowers give freely to the world. It is in this spirit that we dedicate our morning offering.

Let us consecrate our morning offering, our mission offering, and the many gifts we joyfully share with our church and with this world for the furtherance of God’s kingdom on earth. Let us pray.

*As we offer our gifts to you, O God, may we remember those of your children who are too often forgotten by us—the hungry, the lonely, the unhoused, the immigrant, the refugee, the shut-in—those of your children who are important citizens in your kingdom. Stir our hearts to invite them to the rich banquet table that our Lord shares with us and which he calls us to share with one another. We ask this in the spirit of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.*