

COVENANT WORD

I Call You Friend

Acts 10:44-48; I John 5:1-6; John 15:9-17

A message by
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Pastor
Sunday | May 6, 2018

Dear Friends,
Thank you for wanting
to read and study these
thoughts more
carefully. Please know
that I do not take full
credit for anything that
may be contained within,
because I may have read
or heard something at
some point during my
pilgrimage and do not
remember its source and
thus, cannot give the
rightful author his/her
credit. I pray that you
will find inspiration and
encouragement.
Sarah Shelton



WHERE FAITH COMES TO LIFE

It was the first day of school at Cherokee Bend Elementary. The fourth graders filed into Mrs. Dee's classroom. As they took their seats, they recognized that a new child was among them. He was blonde and blue eyed, and carried a brief case. Coming from Wisconsin, he talked funny. The first few days were awkward for David John Schneider, but once the other boys realized his athletic abilities and the girls recognized a quick smile and harmless teasing, David found his place. In particular, David found his place with four others: Bob Lumpkin, John Hilly, Scott Wiggins and Lloyd Shelton.

They became known as "The Big Five," and they felt invincible when together. There was church league and varsity basketball, card games, and retreats; together they passed through rites of passage like getting their driver's license, attending prom, and first kisses. They graduated from High School and then most went to the University of Alabama, where most pledged the same fraternity and rotated rooming together. They were in one another's weddings and held each other's newborns. And they consoled one another when marriages fell apart and children struggled. They buried one another's parents and David, in particular and without our knowledge, took it upon himself to act as the parking valet at Valley Chapel in the pouring rain as visitation occurred inside for Lloyd's Dad.

So when Lloyd and I married, I was introduced to the power that emanates from male bonding...from friendship that has been in existence now for almost 5 decades. I learned quickly

that everything stops when Bob, John or David calls. And I learned that it was the better part of wisdom not to ask Lloyd to choose between these friends and something that I would rather Lloyd do. Because of their friendship, I cannot tell you how many times I have heard about the day David, in a fit of teenage angst, took a baseball bat to a telephone pole. Hitting the sweet spot of the bat, it ricocheted off the pole so that he hit himself in the head as his friends laughed while standing on the shoulder of the road. I have heard about a trip to Knoxville for a Tennessee game and how drinks were spilled all over the interior of

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the Schneider's custom van. And there was the time that all of David's pledge brothers were dressed down by an active because David walked four miles to show up at work on time. It wasn't really their fault. David just didn't want to impose on anyone for a ride. David was prone to not show up from time to time, and so the now famous expression "don't pull a Schneid on us!" holds tender reflection. He always had the latest man-toys for hunting and fishing. He also had an enormous Winnebago that hosted tail gates in Tuscaloosa. In fact, I often wondered if for David Schneider there were only three seasons in a year: deer season, turkey season and football season.

We have watched and intervened (as

allowed) over these last few years as David struggled with severe depression and a variety of health issues. Even still, we were surprised to receive the call last Saturday telling us that our friend David had died. It was a heart attack, but he was deep in the woods of Conecuh County hunting for turkey. Even David would have approved of this way to meet his Maker! I listened as Lloyd called Bob and Hilley to make them aware. While his voice was understandably choked, I was reminded anew of the power of friendship: how it endures over years and remains even beyond the grave; the constant loyalty involved and the determined remembering of only what is true, honorable, just, pure, lovely, gracious, the things worthy of praise and then, with grace and kindness, blow the rest away.

In scripture, several friendships are mentioned: (Fisher Humphreys, *I Have Called You Friends*, pp. 184 ff)

- + I Samuel tells about Jonathan and David.
- + In Acts, some friends intervene to care for Paul as a prisoner. (27:3)
- + In the Old Testament, two men are said to have been friends of God. They are Abraham and Moses. (Is. 41:8-10, James 2:23, Ex. 33:11)
- + In the New Testament, Jesus is criticized for being a "friend of sinners" (Mt. 11:19); Jesus refers to Lazarus as his friend (John 11:11), and John the Baptist speaks of himself as Jesus' friend (John 3:29).

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The classic passage about friendship, however, is today's scripture from John 12:

This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, than to lay down one's life for one's friends.

These are some of the last words of instruction that Jesus gives to the disciples. Chapters 13-17 of John's

gospel are often called "The Farewell Discourse." Fred Craddock likens the scene between Jesus and his disciples to children playing on the floor, who happen to look up and see that their parents are preparing to leave for the evening. The children ask obvious questions, "Where are you going? Can we go too? Who is going to stay with us to take care of us?" (Shannon Kershner, Fourth Presbyterian

"And They'll Know We are Christians by Our..." May 10, 2015. She is quoting Frances Taylor Gench, *Encounters with Jesus*, p. 106) The disciples ask these same questions in those chapters of long farewell. Thomas asks: "Lord, where are you going?" Peter wants to know, "Why can I not follow you?" And Jesus gives the assurance that he "will not leave us orphaned." It is a lovely parallel, because it speaks of such intimate relationship. It speaks of the mixture of heartbreak and sweetness whenever we realize that we are in a good-bye moment with a friend.

This conversation takes place after Jesus washes the disciples' feet, laying aside his garments just like he will lay aside his life. It takes place after Jesus sits at the table with the twelve and Jesus takes the bread, Jesus blesses the bread, Jesus breaks the bread, and Jesus shares it with his friends. It takes place after Peter has robustly refused that he will deny Jesus three times. Today's words are spoken in the overflow from having shared a good meal together. The dishes and wine bottles are empty. Everyone's hunger is satisfied by the hospitality of Passover, and the conversation dwindles to what is essential. Jesus' expressions of love create a safe place of warmth and nourishment not just for the body but for the soul. And so he gives the last instructions.

These chapters are the only place in all of John's gospel that Jesus uses the word "commandment." He states it repeatedly:

- + 13:34 A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another.
- + 14:15 If you love me, you will keep my commandments.
- + And then today's passage in chapter 15 where Jesus says twice that his commandment is to love one another.

Over and over again, Jesus tells his friends, his loved

ones, the disciples, that even when he is physically absent from them, we are called to live out our faith by practicing love that seeks the well-being of others, regardless of how we actually feel about the other. Gail O'Day writes, ("I Have Called You Friends," Center for Christian Ethics at Baylor University, 2008): "What counts most is the embodiment of God's love in the world, not the character of those who receive this love!" As a community of people who are loved by God, as a community who have been told and who know they occupy space in the heart of the Divine, as loved ones of Jesus, loving each other is the only acceptable response. (Kershner)

Lauren Winner says that she observed this type of love on a Sunday that she assisted in serving communion. (Still, pp. 37-39) She was the guest preacher in an episcopal church and since she is not a priest, she could not lead communion, but she could follow the priest with the chalice and offer it to anyone who came to the communion rail.

She says:

I don't know the people in this congregation: I don't know anything about the triplets who sport pink glasses...I don't know anything about the man with one arm or the college-aged woman who surely shops at thrift stores...then comes an elderly couple. ...They kneel at the rail as fragile as mushrooms.

What I learn later is that for over a dozen years, he has been afflicted by a wasting intestinal disease. ...he lives on Ensure and lemonade. But at the altar, I don't yet know that. I only know what I see: they each take a wafer from the priest; and when I come to them with the chalice, the wife dips as I say "The Blood of Christ keep you in everlasting life." She eats her wafer. Then her husband likewise intincts his round of Christ's Body into the wine and then he hands the round of Body and Blood to his wife and she eats his wafer for him.

This is not just the one flesh of marriage, this is friends who carry the body of Christ for us when we cannot. It is friends who not only are in communion, but who are communion. It is friends who gobble up

one another's body of Christ, because he is our friend collectively showing us love by laying down his life for us.

Every day this week, Lloyd has heard from someone new inquiring about their friend, David. So every day, there have been new stories as these friends practice remembrance. It is what we do at this table. We practice remembrance. We say, "The body of Christ, broken for you." And "The blood of Christ, shed for you." But Jesus says, "Every time you eat the bread and drink the wine, remember me." So today, remember the friend you have in Jesus Christ and the ways he continually shows his love to you. We welcome all believers to this table as we remember how Jesus took the bread, blessed the bread, broke the bread and shared it with who? Yes, Jesus shared it with his friends.

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