Sunday, May 25, 2003
WHAT A JESUS WE HAVE IN A FRIEND
John 15:12-17

The title of the sermon is not a misprint—"WHAT A JESUS WE HAVE IN A FRIEND.” There’s a familiar hymn with a slightly different name: What a Friend We Have in Jesus. Both statements are theologically correct. Both speak of friendship. When you are connected to other human beings in a positive, loving way, you are automatically connected to Jesus and to God. In the scripture reading for today, Jesus is quoted as saying, “You are my friends.” He did not say “You are my servants” or “my followers” or “my disciples,” but “You are my friends.”

Most of you have a number of people you consider to be your friends. Yet when was the last time you said to someone, “You are my friend?” If you’re like me, most of the time, you take your friendships for granted. With your spouse or children or other family members, you sometimes say, “I love you,” or “Thanks for everything you do.” I remember a few years ago, a man in this congregation said to me, “Otis, you are my good friend.” It remains a precious, memorable moment. I think of it especially whenever I read this passage from the Bible where Jesus said to his disciples, “You are my friends.”

“You are my friend.” The meaning of true friendship remains elusive. You’ve heard people say, “It’s nothing serious. They’re just friends.” Or, “She has many acquaintances, but no true friends.” Or, “I know him, but I’m not sure I could have him for a friend.”

What did Jesus imply when he said, “You are my friends?” As a result of this sermon, I hope you will come to a new understanding of friendship and, in the process, discover that to truly be a friend to someone is being “Jesus” to that person. Also, think of it this way: if you want to meet Jesus, you can meet him in a friend.

It is the foundation of the Christian faith that God’s love has come among us most visibly and uniquely in the person of Jesus. So it is that this love of God is spread in the world in our being friends to each other.

It is also a basic tenet of the Christian faith that God has created human beings so that we need each other. You live a longer, happier, and healthier life when you have friends you can visit and interact with on a regular basis. Your life is more fulfilling when you have someone who knows you better than anyone else and yet accepts you, enjoys your company, needs you, keeps your secrets, and is ready to help when necessary.

Years ago, when the first centers for longer-living people were built — places like Gateway Manor and Eastmont and many others now in Lincoln and in cities and towns across the country so that longer-living people could live among friends — no one at first predicted how much such living arrangements would lengthen life. Individuals or couples could “buy into” a place like Gateway Manor and would be guaranteed life-long residence. The “buy-in” payments were based on actuarial tables on life expectancy. Then it was discovered that people living in such arrangements were living longer than the actuarial tables were predicting, and many of the down payments had to be adjusted upward. They were living longer not only because of regular meals and good medical care but also because of living in community with other human beings.

Each person needs at least one good friend. Even those who believe they ought to love everyone need one or more special persons as friends. It's difficult to describe the precise difference between a close friend and a casual friend, but this doesn't matter much because if you have a close friend, you will know the difference.

The most crucial component of friendship is trust. All friendship is built on trust between human beings. When we sing, What a Friend We Have in Jesus, we are singing about a basic trust. We are saying that he will never reject us, no matter what our shortcomings. When he said to his disciples, "You are my friends," he was assuring them that nothing they could do would break their relationship with him as friends.

Friendship always involves trust because one of life's choices is to make friends or not make friends. You choose your friends, and they choose you. You cannot choose your biological parents or other relatives. You cannot choose your sisters or brothers. They are that by definition. Becoming a friend with someone is something which is freely given and freely received.

Circles of friendship are always a threat to any kind of authoritarian control because friendship cannot be organized or controlled from the outside.

Surprisingly, few political theorists talk about the role of the friend in the public order. I read somewhere that when Thomas Jefferson first drafted the Declaration of Independence, he wanted to include the notion that a republic was built on affection. The people who came to these new shores were free to be affectionate toward each other and to be friends of the soil itself.

Thus behind Jefferson and modern United States political order, there is a long heritage of thought connecting friendship to participatory government. Friendship and freedom support each other. No one is able to force you to be a friend. Choosing friends is an act of freedom, and it is training for participation in a free society.

Much of our civil life in a free society is based on honor in the same way as friendship has to rely on honor. You do not necessarily seek or gain advantages through being friends. You do not sign contracts that define your friendship. You do not have ceremonies in which you promise to be friends forever.

The point is that being a friend and having friends makes you a better all-around citizen. True friendship is based on equality. Close friends treat each other as equals, and that too is good experience for living in a free society.

At the opposite extreme, revolutionaries and fanatics seldom, if ever, have room for friendship, nor are they capable of friendship. They are too afraid to trust others. They want blind followers who will not ask questions. On the other hand, people who work for justice and equality in the world welcome supporters. They welcome friends who will trust each other enough to be able to ask, "Are you sure?" "Have we forgotten something?" "Are we being too self-righteous?"

Friends can make jokes with each other. They can laugh together and with each other. They can laugh at their own self-righteousness, at their mistakes, and at their pretensions. One test of friendship is: "Can you laugh openly and without reservation together?"

Like laughter, friendship cannot be organized or programmed. Friendship is inefficient. It takes time and cannot be run according to a tight time schedule. Fanatics have no room for that kind of friendship because they cannot trust anyone that much and because they cannot face their own personal inner doubts.

Friendship fits between the cracks in life. It breaks through the little chinks where the sun was supposed to be blocked or seeps in under locked doors. Friendship is one of the freest forms of association in most cultures. It cannot be diagrammed on an organizational chart. It can break any boundary. Friendship often defies normal human logic. Haven't you many times wondered, "How could those two be such close friends?"

One of the most graceful features of friendship, yet one of the most threatening to its survival, is the fact that you can take it for granted. When you are surrounded by friends, you seldom think about how much your friends sustain life and happiness.

A good metaphor for friendship is music. Like the grace of God itself, the gift of friendship in your life is part of the undertone in the bass; it gives a grounding while the treble can trill and soar. It is part of the firm ground on which a person walks, so firm that you can dance without reflecting on it.

When a friendship disappears, you suddenly become conscious of what it meant to you — as if the bass notes are missing and you have only aimless and unharmonious notes remaining; as if the ground had dropped out beneath you. Without friends, you become more preoccupied and busy with the tasks of survival and worry more about yourself.

How does friendship begin? It only has a chance when you begin to become an open, more trusting individual. Then friends begin to appear in many and surprising places. It's the same kind of openness that is part of a deepening spiritual life — an openness to the Divine. The more you open yourself to the world around you, the more you are open to God, the more you are also open to friendships of many kinds.

Why do some people seem to close themselves off from others in the first place? Some, of course, have been severely hurt or disappointed in previous human relationships and now distrust any bit of openness lest they be hurt again and more deeply.

Other people are impatient. Friendships take time to develop and deepen. They cannot be hurried or forced into a timetable.

Still, other people are always so serious about themselves, so much involved in their own projects, plans, and schedules that they simply leave no time for others anywhere in their lives. Friendship requires time for others.

There are also people who are so impressed with their own importance that there is little room in their lives. It's like the celebrity who spends a lot of time getting recognizable enough so that he or she has to wear dark glasses to protect his or her privacy and then complains about having to wear them.

Being a loving friend is different from being a loving neighbor. You can be a loving neighbor without being a friend. Jesus told you to love your neighbor as yourself, and he defined "neighbor" as being anyone in need. You can be a loving neighbor without ever becoming a friend to the person you have aided. Of course, some of you could have neighbors who are

also your close friends. Each one of us has many neighbors, but most people have only a few close friends.

Another fact about friendship is that friends change. There are old friends, and we make new friends. There are those friends you have not seen for years at a time, and when you visit them again, you can take up the friendship almost as if no time had passed. With others, you cannot do this. Some friends fade away over the years. That's normal. Your closest friend in elementary school, middle school, or high school will not necessarily remain your close friend all through life. That's okay.

It's not possible for all friendships to last forever. Friends die. Friends move to another part of the country, and you always have the opportunity for making new friends.

When a church congregation is fulfilling its calling, then the friendship the church has to offer is unlike that in any other place. It is extraordinarily inclusive. "You are my friends," said Jesus. He didn't say, "You who are virtuous," or "You who are respectable," or "You who have good jobs." He said, "You, all of you, are my friends. I give myself to you, and I give you to one another. Now go, and be friends with each other." What a Jesus we have in a friend.

That's how it can happen in an open, inclusive, freedom-seeking church. You can make friends with people you might not have known otherwise. You can make friends with individuals you wouldn't choose to talk with even in line at a checkout counter in a store.

What a friend we have in Jesus, and what a Jesus we have in a friend. Both statements are true. Thank God for friends. Amen.