

## ***Called To Be Friends***

Sunday, May 5, 2024

John 15:9-17

Rev. Dr. Chris Keating

*The promise of Jesus is that as we dwell in his love, our joy becomes complete. To abide in Christ is remain attached to the living force that reveals our witness to the world.*

Back in the day, an old towel tucked into the collar of your t-shirt to make a cape was all you needed to become a superhero. The kids with the cool moms had Superman t-shirts or Batman costumes. I did not have a cool mother; I had a sensible mother who was raised during the Great Depression. I made do with a towel. (I'm not bitter, I promise.)

These days it seems like it takes a lot more to be a superhero. In those days, Hollywood could turn a camera on its side to show Batman and Robin scaling a tall building. These days it takes millions of dollars of technology for Spiderman to cast his web across skyscrapers.

It costs a lot to be a superhero today. And the idea that everything has to be bigger, better, and more expensive even filters down to the way we perceive matters of faith and belief. We look at the stories of the apostles in the book of Acts, and we may be envious, as if to say, "I've never seen the church do things like that." My preaching professor Tom Long used to talk about teaching the story of Pentecost to a group of eighth grade confirmation students. He told them Pentecost was the day when the church experienced the Spirit's descent like the rush of a mighty wind. "It filled the entire room where they were sitting," he read, adding "divided tongues as of fire appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages..." As Tom continued to read from the Book of Acts he noticed that the eyes of the kids widened in amazement. "Gosh, Rev. Long," one of them chimed in, "I guess my family was absent that day. I've never seen anything like that!"

It is easy to shrug off these stories as being fanciful or over the top because we know that things just don't happen that way, at least in our experience, or in our church.

And then you come to church and see these beautiful tote bags. These Mother's Day gifts of love are anchored into the DNA of this church. It began over 20 years ago as a way of increasing our outreach. For the past dozen or so years, the bags have gone to

the three St. Louis area Ronald McDonald houses. These are “superhero” sized gifts filled with ordinary items. They are packed by ordinary people of faith, who work hard throughout the year raising the funds so that these gifts can be given in friendship. A quick mathematical calculation will tell you that over the years, this church has given more than \$40,000 in gifts...a reminder that not all superheroes wear capes!

Yes, things like that still happen.

Amazing things. Miraculous even. Years ago we would include an item in the operating budget “just in case” we needed funds to pay for these gifts. We stopped doing that a few years ago because it simply was not necessary. We have always received more than we need for this project.

This amazing story is not just about raising money. It is about friendship; the sort of friendship Jesus describes as holding your loved ones close. It is also about the power of being connected. We are giving these gifts to vulnerable families who may feel cut off and isolated. And as we reach out to them, we are saying, “abide in God’s love.” We are helping their joy to be complete.

“This is my commandment,” says Jesus, “that you love one another as I have loved you.” He continues expanding the metaphor of the vine and branches which we read last week. This is the heart of what it means for ordinary believers to carry within us a superhero-sized faith. It is not only the sort of faith that sees around corners, leaps tall buildings, runs faster than speeding bullets. It is also a faith that grows as we remain connected to Christ, and connected to each other.

We need these words today. We need the promises they contain. Our world has prized individualism over community. But we have discovered that the pursuit of individualism often leads to loneliness. We need community – we need the church – not because the coffee is great or the preaching is inspiring. We need the church to remain rooted in Christ.

This is the heart of our superhero faith: that as we remain connected to Christ, we will grow and produce much fruit. For more than 20 centuries the church has explored this idea of being connected. Michael Jinkins remarks that at first glance, “a Presbyterian understanding of the ‘connectional church’ promises to be as exciting as a brown paper bag.” Our temptation is to think of connectionalism in terms of denominationalism or

church government. But it is more than that, Jinkins argues. It is also the reminder that Jesus is the vine, and we are the branches, that we are connected in love.

“I am the vine,” Jesus says. He does not say, “you ought to consider being the branches.” He says, “You are the branches.” He reminds us of two things: our connection to him is organic and it is life-giving. It produces joy, and as we remain connected to Jesus Christ, we will bear the fruit of friendship.

The vine grower walks into the vineyard. He sees how the weeds of individualism have grown. They’ve promoted the idea that individuals reign supreme, that we are the stars of our own shows. But God also sees the loneliness that has created. The vine growing sees how those weeds have choked out compassion and kindness and loving connection. So, he tends to the vines so that in due time the fruits of friendship will ripen once more. The gift of friendship will bring the hope of God’s love to places where division, and separation have tried to establish dominance.

This is where the promise of the incarnation changes our lives: God dwells with us. Henri Nouwen reminds us that God became human for us to make divine love tangible. Jesus’ love liberates us so that as we remain connected we will be free to live in loving, productive relationship.

A few of us visited the Ville Neighborhood on Tuesday. It was a great field trip, and like all good Presbyterian journeys, it concluded with a fantastic lunch in the Central West End. We drove down to the Ville Neighborhood in Saint Louis to visit Bridge of Hope Ministry. Bridge of Hope operates from an old elementary school that was built to serve Black children. It sits in a neighborhood where decades of economic hardship have taken their toll. It is surrounded by violence and poverty. But the inside has been lovingly cared for and freshly remodeled. It bears witness to hope and friendship, justice and love.

Bridge of Hope has engaged some of the best and brightest of St. Louis’ leaders in business and healthcare. They are creating a space that currently does not exist in our city: a place where homeless persons can continue healing after they are discharged from hospitals. It is a branch of Christ that is bearing fruit.

We learned the story about the founders of Bridge of Hope. Twenty years ago, a pastor and his wife moved into the Ville neighborhood committed to “doing something” to help the neighborhood. But since they were not natives to that area, they did something

amazing. The pastor began knocking on doors. He asked questions, and listened to the stories. He asked, “What do you need in your community?” And he listened as they said, “Our children need fresh produce. Our homeless need a place to shower. Our unemployed need bicycles to get to jobs.”

He didn't try to recycle an idea from another place. Nor did he try to become the star of the show. He went and he listened.

He allowed his connection to Christ to bear fruit so that the branches of the church would surround that hurting community. This is what we are called to do. Listen to the stories of those around us. What do they need? How can we become friends?

“You are my friends if you do what I command you,” Jesus says. Friends, not servants. Friends, not superheroes. Friends, not professionals. Friends who see each other, listen to each other, lay down their lives for each other, and love each other. Amen.