

Living Faith Lutheran Church – May 9, 2021 – John 15:9-17

In our early days in Malawi we heard about a Roman Catholic Priest from Quebec who had established a Mission Station in another region of the country. Father Boucher was one of those gifted people – a linguist, community organizer, handyman, compassionate friend. So when we had the opportunity we went off to visit him.

The Mission was like a village: there was the Church, School, Clinic, small buildings for youth to learn carpentry and carving, a plant nursery and on and on. The most interesting part to me, though, was his Zoo. This was not part of a long-term plan but rather invention born of necessity.

There was one harvest per year and people's lives depended on it. So as crops ripened, people were vigilant to protect them from invaders like monkeys and baboons, hawks and owls, even fierce civet cats. They used stones and arrows and so there were a lot of wounded animals around.

The new Christians understood this was not good so they brought injured animals to Father Boucher and he established this animal rescue operation – a poor man's zoo, of sorts. He invited people after Church to visit the animals, to see they were not enemies but creatures of God. Befriend them, feed them, and heal them.

But the most interesting story was to follow. One day there was a kerfuffle in the yard and an urgent call to Boucher. Someone had brought a sack and in it was a 10 foot python. No one wanted a python for sure, but this poor creature had been beaten within an inch of its life. What to do with an almost dead python?

Someone had an idea: there was an abandoned dry well, about 6 feet deep, so they put the snake in there. It didn't move. Water! So a pot was lowered. Nothing. Food! They put a chicken down the well. Nothing!

The snake got weaker and one day a labourer noticed that the Chicken was sleeping on the Python's head! Now what? A wise worker suggested, "Let's change chickens!" so they removed chicken A and lowered Chicken B. WHAP – in a split second the chicken was in the Python's mouth. Recovery had begun.

I have told that story to Children in many Churches – some kids supposed I just made it up. But I always asked, "What do you think this story means?" There were many good answers but one morning a thoughtful, older child answered: I think the story means that we should not eat our friends!" BINGO!

Today, in John 15, Jesus continues his teaching on love – it is the source of life flowing from God the Father, through Jesus and into us,

But what I have found interesting these past days is that divine love, as Jesus describes it, is not like dew upon the grass, or oxygen that we breath, but it is tied to obedience.

- Jesus obeys the Father's commands
- So the disciple obeys Jesus' commands
- In this relationship, love flows, heals, converts

But, God's love does more – there is another fruit of this relationship: Friendship! Friendship built on love and trust.

This love has no bounds - even to the extent that one will lay down her life for a friend.

This notion of friendship as a key component of discipleship has rested with me for quite a while now.

One of the hardships of this COVID 19 lockdown has been our inability to spend time with our friends. Facebook, Zoom, telephones all help – but how we miss a hug, that smile, the chuckles without anything even being said.

Linda has reconnected with high school friends and now they have these rather noisy Zoom reunions. A good friend of mine in Ottawa whom I haven't seen face to face for years, has just been diagnosed with terminal cancer. Oh to be able to see him again.

You all have your stories I am sure.

Jesus takes us one step further – He speaks of friendship with its origins in the love of God, a friendship that defies even the power of death.

Friendship can take many forms . . .

I grew up on a farm and weeds were our enemies. When the barley was starting to grow the mustard would appear. I got 1 cent for every mustard stalk I collected. Back then, 50 cents would buy 4 comic books and 2 chocolate bars. Later came “better life through chemistry”, as Dow Chemicals proclaimed. Linda grew up in Apple Country, I grew up in Potato country and we both know people who succumbed to cancer after inhaling these poisons on the earth.

We also had a neighbour who was an organic farmer. We all thought he was nuts - but I remember him as the most calm and loving person – and his crops often out performed everyone else's. We have very been late in learning that the natural world is not an enemy to conquer but a friend to embrace.

Another lesson I have learned over many years, is the difficulty in making friends with myself. This week we will start our Zoom study on a book by Parker Palmer called: *On the Brink of Everything: Grace, Gravity and Growing Old*. I won't give away the plot line but he mentions one of his greatest fears – he writes: I cannot think of a sadder way to die than to learn that I never showed up in this world as who I really am.

We spend a lot of time and energy trying to be someone we are not. A lot of time trying to hide parts of us we don't really like. We go along with the crowd when our gut says Stop!

I am not a psychologist, but I do know we all have a shadow side: there are things we've done or said, things we have failed to do, emotions that shame us, that we try to hide and bury. So we become less than God intended us to be. The love of God in Jesus is blocked from those parts of our lives we try to hide and deny.

In this Easter Season, I often return to John 21 when the Risen Jesus cooks breakfast for the disciples as they return from a fishless night on the sea. Later, Jesus speaks to Peter – the rock who has crumbled; the brave one who denied his Lord.

Jesus does not rehearse the night of denial; he does not tell Peter to smarten up or he's out of a job; Jesus simply asks Peter, "Do you love me?" Yes? Then feed my sheep.

This is the love that flows to broken places, that heals, restores, and brings courage.

Remember the Prodigal Son? He had a speech prepared – his confession to his Father. But before he could blurt it out the old father embraced him, kissed him, welcomed him home.

Confession is necessary, we need to say the words, and Jesus is eager to make our hearts his home – so we need to make some space.

I hope we can all befriend ourselves with the healing/forgiving love Jesus offers to us.

A final point. We are all concerned about Congregational decline and the need for growth. It has been a while since I looked at all the research around this topic, but I do know there is one variable that still counts for about 80% or more of growth. Friendship.

This does not mean merely being a friendly Church – I've been to some of those when on vacation and, after service, stood alone with my cup of coffee as all the friendly people connected with each other. No, real friendship risks the invitation to walk with someone as they seek to connect with that divine mystery we know as the love of God in Jesus. Church is a living body that thrives in the friendship of Jesus.

In 2 Timothy (4:1-5) there is a warning to the Church in the world – the days are coming when people will have itchy ears and follow all manner of strange myths.

These are those days – people are looking everywhere for meaning; people are searching for love. People are walking in the woods and gazing at the sea; trying arcane forms of spiritual exercises.

We are not arrogant – we are, as someone said, beggars telling other beggars where to find bread.

The Bread of Life, the Vine of Life, the Friendship of Jesus, is this not a good place to start?

If a wounded Python would die before eating his friend, well . . . it makes you think.