

John 15:9-17 ~ Acts 10:44-48  
 Even *Those* People?  
 6<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter ~ Holy Communion  
 The Rev. Dr. Laurie Brubaker Davis

*Introduction to the Second Scripture Lesson:*

Gym and recess. If you asked most kiddos what their favorite subjects are in grade school, they will say "gym" (although I've learned it's called "Phy. Ed" around here) and recess. When I was in school, the thing about gym that I *didn't* like was when we were divided into two teams and then stood in a group and waited to get chosen. Waiting to be picked or chosen for a team. And the longer you waited, the worse it got. Your ranking was based on a tense combination of popularity contest and your physical ability. I was never among the first to be chosen for a kickball team during gym. And was always grateful if I wasn't the last or the next to last to be chosen.

Did you hear what Jesus said to his disciples in our first scripture reading? "You did not choose me, but I chose you." He said he chose them to be his "friends." Friends on "Team Jesus." How cool is that? Jesus' divine declaration of friendship occurs in the heart of what is known as his "Farewell Discourse" in John's gospel: Jesus' last teachings and parting words as he prepared his disciples for his departure from this earth. These sayings, including this one about choosing his disciples as friends, occur *after* Jesus had washed their feet. After choosing to do this awkward thing: their Lord and Rabbi, taking a towel and doing what only servants do. Again, he shocks them with this most remarkable, astonishing, upside-down turn from established tradition. "You did not choose me, but I chose you." In their culture, students always chose the Rabbi, never the reverse. But here, Jesus takes his disciples to a new level: "You are my friends. I do not call you servants any longer, I have chosen you and called you friends..."

Ever since Facebook was created in 2004 (twenty years ago!), "friending" has become a verb that requires no more than a second's consideration before you click and accept, and "choose" that person to be your "friend." On Facebook you can become friends quicker than Mystik Dan won the Kentucky Derby yesterday in a thrilling upset. Today, let's slow down and think for a moment, who has been a close friend to you? What makes a close friend, really? Someone you can talk to; someone you can depend on. Someone you enjoy being with. Someone you feel like you can tell everything and anything to, yes? A friend is someone you can take off the mask with and know they will love you no matter what.

Who comes to mind for you? What face, or voice, or feeling as you think about a dear friend. Try to remember how that deep friendship got started. Hold that friend in your mind, as we turn to our second lesson in Acts 10. In this text we helicopter into the final dramatic conclusion of a new lesson in friend making for Peter and his disciples, (newly minted "Apostles" now). Just how wide does that divine circle of friendship go? Let us partake in the sacred in this reading of Acts 10:44-48.

*Communion Meditation:*

"Those people." We all have them. The people that are "not us." We don't like the way they think. Or what they say and do. Or believe. The signs in their yard, the bumper stickers on their cars, really? Be friends with *those* people? Let's be honest: we choose to live in parallel universes and prefer it to keep it that way. How can they even live with themselves? Earlier, I asked you to bring to mind a close friend. Now I'm going to ask you a harder question. Who are "those people" for you? Who came to mind when I was describing those who are "not us." "Those people." Don't worry I won't ask you to share who came to mind with the person sitting next to you.

For Peter and the other disciples, *those people* were the Gentiles. Gentiles are all people who are not Jews. I will remind you: Jesus was a Jew. And so were all his disciples. On the Day of Pentecost back in Acts 2, all the people from "every nation under heaven" who came to Jerusalem were "devout Jews." That story, involves "devout Jews from every nation under heaven." In today's story Peter is preaching about Jesus of Nazareth, to a whole different crowd: not to devout Jews, but to Gentiles.

*Those people.* Yes, the Holy Spirit was being poured out "even on the Gentiles" here in Acts 10. I will remind you that to observant Jews in Jesus' day Gentiles were considered unclean people who were an absolute abomination. The purity scale or spectrum of persons in Judaism in the New Testament world began at the center, the most clean or pure were Priests, then Levites, to Full-blooded Israelites, then Proselytes/Gentile converts, then Eunuchs. Gentiles were simply off the purity scale all together. They were unclean, unworthy: people they did not talk to, associate with, or eat with. It was, in fact, unlawful for a Jew to associate with or to visit a Gentile.<sup>i</sup>

What I love about this story, and about the Book of Acts in general, is the dramatic wind of the Holy Spirit doing strange, upsetting, unsettling, mind-boggling things at just about every turn. In these four verses we have another mini-Pentecost with the Holy Spirit being poured out, people speaking in tongues, but this time Gentiles being baptized. And then Peter and the other Apostles actually staying with these "not us" unclean Gentiles for several days. (This is not a throwaway line.) Sleeping in their homes, eating at their tables for several days, signified a huge turnaround in belief and in practice. This is another wild story of conversion in the Book of Acts, also known as Book Two of Luke. Yes, Cornelius became a believer in Christ. And Peter came to see Cornelius and all those Gentiles in a different light. A conversion for both of them, and their communities.

This whole crazy thing had actually begun five days earlier with just the two men: Cornelius, a Gentile who was a centurion of the Italian Cohort, and our friend, the now "Apostle Peter." The Holy Spirit had given them both strange visions through dreams that pushed them into conversation and dialogue with one another. Awkward, weird, scary. The breaking down of those boundaries and biases began when these two men started to see each other with their masks off and their shared humanity shining brightly. (Read Acts 10:1 – 11:18 for the whole story.)

That's the thing about abiding in the love of Christ. That's the thing about Jesus choosing us as friends and telling us *everything* that he had heard from God. Even the hard stuff, like the call to befriend those we consider to be "not us." To be a friend of Christ calls us to befriend the world. Even "those people." Even all of creation. You heard what Jesus said in John 15: that is the kind of befriending that gives Jesus joy in us. And the kind of befriending that makes *our* joy complete. But not right away. To open our eyes and hearts wider to people and creatures different than we are, is risky. And uncomfortable. This kind of befriending also takes time, attention, and patience. And it more often than not, takes us by surprise.

Like the day that three Mexican families showed up for worship here at FPC out of the blue. They were new to Marshfield and looking for a church home. Although at first, as the story goes, one of the greeters asked them if they were looking for the Catholic church to which they replied, "Oh no, the Presbyterian church, is here, yes?" And then from that moment on, you all opened your doors and hearts to these beloved folks. Slowly, they became a part of us, changed us for the better. Inspired us to add Spanish to our liturgy. One of those families is still with us, and a part of the leadership and pulse beat of our faith community.

The Holy Spirit, catalyzed by these families, inspired us to form what is now called the Immigration Action Team. In the past decade this Team has engaged in a variety of befriending projects. Awkward, challenging, new, sanctified. More recently it was our hosting of the Mexican Mobile Consulate last year, a project that took about 5 years to bring about. And when it actually happened, surprised and caught off guard by the scope and scale, (the number of folks waiting in line over an hour before they opened, hoping to get an appointment that Sunday looked like a shopping mall "Black Friday" morning) had a Pentecost feel, I would say.

Another example of Holy Spirit calling us, FPC, to befriend the world was back in 2017 when out of the blue we were asked to host the "Love Water Not Oil" tour. This was a group of activists led by Winona LaDuke, and her sister and an additional 12-15 folks from their Anishinaabe nation protesting Dakota Access Pipeline, and specifically the Enbridge pipeline expansion through Wisconsin. This pipeline threatened crucial water supply and would desecrate sacred indigenous lands. We served them dinner (pulled together very fast) and helped to find them a place to stay for the evening, these folks and all their horses. After this encounter, we started supporting their tribe by purchasing wild rice in our Fair Trade cabinet.

As we grapple with where our commitment to being a "Matthew 25 church" is leading us here in 2024, I take joy and gather courage, by seeing how we have stepped up in recent years. How the Holy Spirit has called us to "compassion in action" for "even *those* people." For the last two Sundays, we have had two Forums, one on Tending the Earth, and one last Sunday considering the next chapter of our Matthew 25 journey. These conversations call for deep thought and reflection. Something that takes time and listening and speaking the truth in love to one another. When I see us doing this, I know God is smiling. Just as Jesus washed feet, broke bread, poured wine. Just as Jesus said whenever we welcome one stranger or give one cup of water: He was teaching us, friend to friend, to think small (micro) and think big (macro) at

the same time. What might the Spirit have in store for us? Together we will discern the answer to that question in the days and weeks ahead.

Today, as we come to the Table in a few moments, I invite you to bring with you the friend who came to mind when I began this sermon and asked you who had been a friend to you. Offer a prayer of thanks to God for that friend. Consider giving them a call or a text later today to express your gratitude to them directly. During communion, (here or wherever on-screen worshippers may be) I invite you, if you dare, to also bring whoever happens to be “those people” to the Table as well. For Peter and the Apostles, back in the first century, it was the Gentiles. Who is it for you? Bring them to the Table. What wall in your heart needs to be melted in the abiding presence of Christ’s love? That’s what Jesus was dying to do for us. Then and now. You can make Jesus’ joy complete. The One whose body was broken for you, for me, and for “those people.” The one who calls us, “friend.”

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<sup>i</sup> Bruce J. Malina, *The New Testament World: Insights from Cultural Anthropology*, (John Knox Press: Louisville, KY, 1981), pp.131-134.