

Let us pray.

O God of Love, O God of Truth;

Let us say strong things gently and gentle things strongly.

Let us speak the truth in love to all
and love the truth that lives in each.

Let us hear the truth as we each need it and live that truth.

O God, we heed it through Jesus; Your Word & our Lord.

Amen.

The House Made By Hearts

John 15:5-15

“I am the true vine and you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers, then gathered as burned. If you abide in and my words in you, ask whatever you wish and it shall be done. My Father is glorified by this and you shall bear much fruit. If you keep my commandments you will abide in my love, just as I kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love. I have said these things to you that your joy may be complete. This is my commandment: that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this - to sacrifice one’s life for friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer, I call you friends, for servants don’t know what their master is doing, but I call you friends because I have made known to you everything from the Father...”

2 Corinthians 5:1

“For we know that if our earthly tent were destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands...”

The first church in Dorset was made of hand-hewn logs and situated in what is now the frontage of Maple Hill Cemetery. It was called “The Lord’s Barn”.

Then, under the prosperous ministry of Rev. William Jackson, The Lord’s Barn was moved west, to Church St. and expanded.

Then, one chilly January evening, in 1832,

The Lord’s Barn burned down.

By February, 1833,

spear-headed by a man named Experience Barrows, a new church was built that was the pride of the region.

It was timber-framed, white clap-board exterior with a belfry in the style we now have, only wood.

Then, in 1907, fire destroyed that 2nd wooden building.

The better part of wisdom,

plus the generosity of the Norcross Building Company, allowed the people to build a new church;

this time made of marble.

But one church historian, Judy Barrows, said it best.

‘This church’s one foundation was born from strength, dignity, love, devotion, dedication & sacrifice.’

In other words, hand-hewn logs,

or nicely milled lumber, or bravely quarried marble are NOT the true building materials for a church.

A CHURCH IS BEST MADE BY HEARTS.

What really builds a church and holds it together is something spiritual, not something made with hands. To appropriate the title of Millar Fuller's book about the birthing of Habitat for Humanity, *Love In the Mortar Joints* is the perfect description of what it takes to make a church.

But spiritual bricks and spiritual mortar have themselves been a source of great debate. Is the church a group of people who all believe the same dogma & doctrine? Many Christians think so.

Or is the church a group of people who fly the same Christian banner - Catholics, Baptists, Episcopalians, Congregationalists, Presbyterians? Many Christians think so.

Or is the church a group who all profess to be "born again", and all call Jesus "their personal Lord & Savior"? Many Christians think so.

Now, I don't want to demean any of those criteria, but the key question is, "What did Jesus think?" If Jesus were the architect or carpenter of this or any church that called itself "Christian"

and professed to live in Jesus' name,
what would he say truly builds a church?

In this morning's scripture lesson,
I think we find a blueprint of Jesus' hopes and dreams.

This is my commandment:

that you love one another as I have loved you.

No one has greater love than this - to sacrifice for one's friends.

You are my friends if you do what I command you.

The mortar that holds together
the church of Jesus Christ - is friendship.

What matters most isn't just the individual constitution
of each parishioner,

it's the spiritual bond BETWEEN them.

Now, I'm not saying that our faith wasn't meant to be
personal - it should be!

Nor am I saying that our private lives don't matter -
they most certainly do. After all the bible says,

"God sees in secret and rewards in secret".

But when it comes to the spiritual construction
that makes us a church, it's how we are TOGETHER.

It's our network of relationships that bonds us.

*Where two or three are gathered in Jesus' name
there is the presence of Christ made manifest.*

I often wonder if Mega-churches are truly church.
because the church Jesus hoped for, lived for, died for
was built on friendships.

These powerful and lovely words in John's Gospel
are like Jesus' last will and testament to his disciples.
After he says them, he heads out to the Gethsemane
where he is betrayed, arrested, tried and crucified.

But what he leaves behind him is the first real church,
IF THEY ARE FRIENDS.

Friendship.

I dare say, most of us might say

“Well, that's no problem! I am friendly.

I have lots of friends. Just check my Facebook page.

I smile at people. They smile back.

I laugh and people laugh back.

I get invited to lots of parties.

Lots of people say “Hi” to me on the street.

I work hard to be popular.

If friendship is the crux of Christianity,

I've got this down!”

Well, slow down a bit. If it were so easy,
why would Jesus have to COMMAND it?

There may be some aspects to sacred friendship
that we need to work on.

The 1st thing is found in these words.

*“I do not call you servants any longer, I call you friends,
for servants don’t know what their master is doing,
but I call you friends because I have made known to you
everything from the Father...”*

In Christian friendship there is no hierarchy.

There is no superiority. There is no “I’m better than you.”

Friendship in Christ is egalitarian.

Analyze for a moment, your version of friendships.

Do you hang out with the same friends all the time?

Are they all your same economic class?

Do you invest your smiles, your laughter,

your kindness, your attention, your compassion

in folks who aren’t dressed like you, speak like you,

quaffed like you, smell like you, play like you,

work like you, live like you?

There is no caste system in Christian friendship.

There is no “looking down upon”,

nor is there any “looking up toward”

and therefore “looking down upon”.

I remember the push-back I received from certain family-members, very devout Christian family members, when I announced I was marrying Esther.

Esther - the daughter of a barber.

Her family grew their own food, fixed their own cars,

loved country-western music.

None had gone to college,

And most disconcerting, they were Catholic!

That we loved each other didn't seem to matter
as much all those other criteria.

But "superiority" rears its ugly head in both ways.

I shall never forget my middle-school basketball coach
telling me with a smirk,

"Poor little rich boy; you'll never play for me."

because my father was a country doctor.

The worth of Christian friendship isn't determined by
society or class or privilege.

Just recall the profile of those whom Jesus befriended.

They were uneducated fishermen,

they were reviled tax-collectors,

they were the poor, the lost, the lonely and the needy.

Or, as one minister put it,

"Jesus saw those who were invisible.

Jesus loved those who were unlovable."

A 2nd thing we may be missing in our faithful friendships
is honesty.

To appreciate Jesus' honesty we need to put our scripture

in wider context.

Just before he said these words,

“Love one another as I have loved you.”

he had finished an argument with Peter.

Jesus wanted to wash Peter’s feet,

but Peter would have none of it.

He debated Jesus. He got hot under the collar.

And Jesus came right back at him,

“If you won’t let me wash your feet,

you have nothing to do with me!”

In the Hebrew Scriptures, what we call Old Testament,

God calls Abraham “a friend”.

Likewise, God and Moses exhibit a brand of intimacy

just like two friends who get into heated and honest

debates constantly.

Moses complains and God listens.

Sometimes, God even changes God’s mind

and gives in to Moses.

Sacred friendships are honest.

And yet, how many of our so-called friends

receive from us our honesty?

Not even in families and in marriages

where people swear they love each other,

are they honest in the midst of conflict,

or truthful in times of tension.

“Speak the truth in love” reports the Epistle of Ephesians.

“When someone sins against you, confront them face-to-face” it testifies in Matthew’s Gospel.

And in the Epistle to the Galatians it reads,

“Do I seek to please people? Or do I seek to please God? If I am a people-pleaser, I cannot be a servant of Christ.”

These are all skills of an honest Christian friend.

And a 3rd thing we may miss in sacred friendships is found in these words.

No one has greater love than this - to sacrifice one’s life for friends.

Perhaps some of you have heard on the national news about the death of Peter Reed.

Peter was a former combat Marine, who, after a couple tours in Iraq, decided to become a medic

and work to save lives rather than take them.

So he got medical training and started going to a number of the hot spots around the world.

Those places where medical needs were huge and hospitals, doctors and nurses were rare.

In Afghanistan, in Haiti

and recently in Ukraine for an organization named
Global Response Medicine.

Then just last week,
while working on the front-lines in the Donbas region,
a Russian missile hit his vehicle
and Peter Reed was killed.
He was 33 years old.
He'd just gotten married a year ago.
And he is the beloved nephew of our own,
Sue and Don Hinkle.

This weekend, in bars and homes and gatherings
all over the world,
thousands of friends of Peter Reed will mourn his loss
and give thanks for his sacrifice.

I'm not sure if any of those celebrations of Peter's life
will take place in a church building.
But, by definition, those gatherings will, in fact,
BE CHURCH.

I think it's far more common for us to think,
**“What can I get from my friends?
How will my friendships benefit my life?”**
But according to friendships as defined by Jesus,
the One who calls us to love one another

as he loved us,
the defining question is
“How can I sacrifice for my friends?”

In closing, in a matter of minutes,
we shall be having our annual meeting as a church.
It is a temptation to think that voting and electing
and crunching budget numbers and hearing reports
and making strategies and planning programs
is the business of being church.
The truth of the matter is
the real business of the church
is being friends in Christ.

Prayer of Pastoral Care Feb 12, 2023 Epiphany 6

In Psalm 119 we read, *Happy are those who seek the way of the Lord, who seek God with their whole hearts.* (1-2).

Let us offer our prayers to God, with the response:

God, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Holy God, your cross stands before us as a light that shows us our failures and our salvation, our wholeness as humans, through your Son. We thank you for forgiving us and for coming among us to heal your peoples' pain and resentments. We yearn for your word and praise you for your love.

God, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

O God, you send among your people caretakers and peacemakers to preserve life. You give us scientists and inventors, who give us new eyes to behold the needs of your Creation. Lead your people into fields of wheat and pools of clean water. Shelter the earth with clouds, nurture the soil with sun. May our awe and gratitude be so profound that we will love and guard what you have created for our very lives.

Honoring your creation, we pray for all victims of natural and man-made disasters on earth. We especially pray for all victims of Monday's earthquake in Turkey and Syria. We mourn the disaster of civil war that has prevented aid from reaching rebel-held Syria in their desperate need. Thank you for all response teams who have worked to save lives and give care at this tragic time. God, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

O Giver of prayer that is deep within us, teach us to pray for our enemies. Their names are many and we whisper some of them now before you in our hearts (in silence) ...

Be with them, and guide them in the way of your light.

We thank you for the President's State of the Union message, and pray for bi-partisan cooperation in our land. For the people of Ukraine, we pray for peace. May the seeds of compassion grow and eventually overcome the violence, death, and suffering of war. Uphold your people in every area of conflict in our world. God, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

We pray comfort for the sick, O God. Make whole the broken, make wise the foolish, and humble the powerful. Make glad the hearts of those who tend the needy. May those who are in pain, find release and rest. God, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

We lift before you those on this church's immediate needs list. ...

Trusting in the mercy of your never-failing wisdom, we commend into your hands all for whom we pray; through Jesus, our Lord.

Amen.

Hymn # 526 The Gift of Love

OFFERING Friends, in obedience to Jesus' words to love others as we love ourselves, to do good, bless, and pray for friends and enemies alike, let us offer our tithes and gifts for the sake of our sisters and brothers in need.

***DOXOLOGY**

***PRAYER**

Loving God, receive the dedication of our heart, minds, and bodies for the ministry and outreach of your church. Bless our offering, and give us wisdom for the right use of all you have provided, through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Hymn # 433 Blest Be the Tie That Binds Our Hearts in Christian Love

