

John 14:15-21

The Sixth Sunday of Easter - May 21

You've got a friend

Roy W. Howard

I heard that James Taylor and Bonnie Raiter playing at Nationals Park this summer. I thought, wow, it must be Grandparents day at the park! Won't the kids have fun watching their hippy grandparents sing You've got a friend? Who doesn't like it? It's also one of those timeless songs that resonate with nearly everyone except hardened cynics. "Winter, Spring, Summer or Fall, all you got to do is call, and I'll be right there, You've got a friend." (Sing)

When you sing that song, someone usually comes to mind. I don't mean friend on Facebook where it's not always clear what friend actually means. I mean an actual flesh and blood friend – who, as James Taylor said, you can call upon and who calls upon you. I love what our book of order says about the calling of deacons: "to be a friend to the friendless." Few things are lonelier than to have no true friend. So the deacons are summoned, along with the rest of us to "be a friend to the friendless." Think about that!

In the 15th chapter of John, during Jesus' final discourse before his ascension, he specifically says to his disciples: **you are my friends**. What can be more life affirming than to be named a friend of Jesus? Here is something else to think about: in the Book of Acts, the fledgling company of Jesus' followers is called **by outsiders**: "the friends of Jesus." It's my persistent hope that Saint Mark be known far and wide as "the friends of Jesus." What if that were the central goal of our presence among our neighbors: to be known as the friends of Jesus – in word and in deed? You could ask yourselves the simple question, who in the community needs a friend right now? What might friends do to show the love of Jesus right now?

In the text for today, Jesus promises not to leave the disciples as orphans. He will ask the Father - the ultimate source of all love - to send them a Companion. The Greek word for companion is Paraclete and is translated in various ways, including Comforter, Counselor, Encourager, Helper and Advocate. Each of these translations is a beautiful description of the Holy Spirit whom the Father will send. The literal translation of "Ho Paracletos" is: "the One called alongside you to help you." Which is why Eugene Peterson translates Paraclete as "True Friend." The Paraclete - the Spirit of Christ – is the True Friend who walks alongside those who follow Christ. How astonishing and beautiful! This is the life of faith we have been given in Christ. He is risen yet in his Spirit is present with you as true friend; the one who will walk alongside you, comfort and encourage you, help and advocate for you. Yes, he will speak truthfully to you when the truth is precisely what you need and cannot get from anyone else but a true friend. To have such a true friend is to be blessed in the most profound sense of the word. This is the rhythm of the Christian life.

Winter, Spring, Summer or Fall, all you got to do is call and I'll be right there, you've got a friend.

Here is the most remarkable thing of all: this True Friend – the Helper Advocate - is specifically named as the presence of the Trinity, who will be given to the disciples of Jesus, the ones whom he calls friends. That little James Taylor song is more beautiful when we consider it as a meditation on the Spirit of Christ who is our deepest true friend. It's not just for hippies and romantics swaying in the Park.

But neither this text nor sermon is really about James Taylor. It's actually about Christian Spirituality that is so often misused and misunderstood. **Spirituality** can mean nearly anything to anyone, and therefore often means nothing to everyone.

Here the gospel gives us a specific meaning of Spirituality. To live in the Spirit is to live in gratitude for the True Friend – the Paraclete - who accompanies you throughout this life. Life in the Spirit is life in Christ. Life in Christ is the profound assurance that you are never alone. You have a companion always, in every circumstance. I learned recently that the German root of the word friendship means "place of high safety." The Spirit of Christ who dwells within you in the "place of high safety."

Jesus says the evidence of this Companion will be a growing love for others. It's simple but no less profound for the simplicity. The spiritual life is utter dependence upon the True Friend - the Spirit within us - who compels you to love. Such love for others is the mark of the friends of Jesus. We live in a time when it's necessary to say emphatically: hate has no place among the friends of Jesus. The friends of Jesus are known by our love for God and for others.

We've spoken of deacons in the book of order. That same book says of elders above all other duties they are called to be guided by the rule of love.

The circle is made complete in love.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.
Amen.