

“Holy Friendship”

a sermon by

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First Presbyterian Church
Charlotte, North Carolina

July 30, 2006

Old Testament Lesson: Exodus 33:7-23

New Testament Lesson: John 15:12-17

Henri Nouwen was a Catholic priest, academician, and prolific spiritual writer who died in 1996. He wrote many books that are well read today, such as The Wounded Healer and The Return of the Prodigal Son. He had an established professorship at Harvard University and was sought after on the lecture circuit, when he began to become more and more aware of an emptiness inside, a hunger – a need that just hadn't been filled, a calling that still had not been satisfied. He said, "I came home and was alone. I didn't really feel well. I didn't really feel peaceful. I didn't really feel very centered. Actually I felt lonely. I didn't know where I belonged. It was a very anguishing time in my life – a time of real pain. I felt guilt and confusion. Here I was talking about God and I was not feeling really well. So, I started to pray very simply. I remember saying this prayer over and over again, "Lord Jesus, let me know where You want me to go and I will follow you." ... I prayed and prayed.¹

One day there was a knock at Nouwen's door. He opened it to a strange woman who said, "I have come to bring you the greetings of Jean Vanier". Nouwen knew that Vanier was the founder of something called the L'Arche communities, that were communities where mentally handicapped people lived, but Nouwen did not know him, nor why Vanier would choose to bring him greetings. Nouwen recognized in this woman's message the possibility of God's answer to his prayers, but it wasn't until 3 or 4 years later that he actually met Vanier at a retreat. At the end of the retreat, Vanier said to Nouwen, "Henri, maybe we, our community of handicapped people, can offer a home to you, can offer a place to you where you are really safe, where you can meet God in a whole new way." Nouwen said, "It was an incredible experience because he didn't ask me to be useful; he didn't ask me to work for handicapped people; he didn't say he needed another priest; he didn't say any of these things. He said, "Maybe we can offer a home to you."

Jesus said to his disciples after inviting him to be his friends, "*You did not choose me, but I chose you.*" This is the call of holy friendship.

After a few more years, the urgency of this new calling finally convicted Nouwen and he left his secure life at the University and eventually ended up at the L'Arche Daybreak Community in Toronto. L'Arche means the arc of Noah, and the mission of this community is for its mentally handicapped residents and their assistants to live in the spirit of Jesus' beatitudes. Nouwen was asked to work with a young man named Adam. Adam was 24 years old. He could not speak, he could not walk, he could not dress or care for himself, he needed assistance to eat and he suffered from continual epileptic seizures. Nouwen says, "I was really afraid... Here I was a university professor. I had never touched anybody very closely and here was Adam." Henri started his day with Adam at 7 am, when he came in to bathe him, dress him, brush his teeth, and give him his breakfast. As he repeated this routine with Adam every day, he said, "Something happened. I was frightened for about a week, a little less frightened after two weeks. After three or four weeks, I started to realize that I was thinking about Adam a lot and that I was looking forward to being with him. Suddenly I knew that something was happening between us that was very intimate, very beautiful and that was of God. I don't know how to say it well."

A holy friendship is beyond words, beyond expression, beyond understanding, because God chooses to dwell in holy friendships and reveal a different kind of love to us than we are accustomed to in our normal relationships. There is an intimacy and a knowing that happens between the participants in the friendship, but there also is a transcendent aspect, a holy Other

¹ Henri Nouwen, "Journey to L'Arche", found at http://www.30goodminutes.org/csec/sermon/nouwen_3301.htm

aspect that cannot even be described. A holy friendship is not only a friendship with another person where God chooses to dwell, but also a friendship and intimacy directly with God.

Let's be clear as we talk about this word friendship in relation to God. Friendship with God is not necessarily a walk in the park, or as in the words of a favorite old hymn, in the garden either! It is not always a warm, fuzzy or Hallmark card type of relationship with sweet platitudes that make one feel at ease. Friendship with God is a friendship with the wholly Other who comes in a pillar of fire or in the robes of a Jewish carpenter. Rather than inviting us into a place comfort, it is friendship that often invites us not to take our lives into our own hands, but to place them into God's hands and trust and follow. It is a friendship that is completely founded in love, but in a love that the world may hate. We cannot be touched by the power of this friendship and remain unchanged.

We have in our Old Testament reading this morning an incredible portrayal of the friendship between Moses and God. After fleeing the Egyptians, the Israelites were a nomadic people. They had this tent, called the Tent of Meeting, where Moses and the people would go when they sought the LORD. Now this is fascinating, because we see in this depiction the beginning of an evolution of the idea of a fixed, sacred space to worship God – a space that later for the Jewish people became the temple. Apparently, when Moses went out to meet the LORD in the tent it was quite an event. We read that the people would get up and go to the doorways of their tents to watch, because after Moses entered the tent a pillar of cloud descended in front of the doorway and stayed there until Moses left. This was the presence of God – an awesome sight that caused the people to worship and bow down. What is even more awesome is the description of the relationship between Moses and God. We read, *“Thus the LORD used to speak to Moses face to face, as one speaks to a friend.”* Suddenly we move from a God who appears in a burning bush or pillar of cloud to a God who becomes Moses' friend. This Yahweh, called Adonai by the Hebrew people for God's name is too holy to be even spoken – this Adonai enters into an intimate relationship with Moses in which God is both very near and yet still very far. We see the intimacy in Yahweh's word coming directly to Moses as with a friend, face to face in the tent. We see the distance, the Otherness, when Yahweh refuses later to directly show Moses his face, the LORD says to Moses, “No one can see me and live.” Our ability to know God always is only partial, for the length, depth, heights of God's presence is too awesome for us to even begin to grasp, much less put into words.

In the gospel of John, Jesus' invitation into friendship comes to his disciples in what is commonly called his “Farewell Discourse”. He has explains to the disciples the metaphor of the vine and the branches, where he is the vine and the Father is the vine grower. He challenges them as branches to abide, or remain in him – in other words to draw their life from him. And he speaks to them of love: “As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love.” (15:9) The ones who abide in his love will find that their Joy will be complete.

Then Jesus moves to talking with them in a much more concrete level. He says to them, “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.” Interesting choice of words here, to command someone to love another. I imagine many of us have tried that commandment with bickering children and found that it just doesn't seem to fly. Yet the word commandment has much history in the Jewish faith, for it hearkens us back to the original 10 commandments that Moses delivered to the people from God – commandments that were meant to be a gift, not a burden, to help the people live in community. When Jesus uses the word commandment here, he is really speaking of God's grace – God's call to be in relationship – a

summation of all the law and the prophets, that we should love the Lord our God with all our heart and mind and strength and our neighbor as ourselves. This is not new; rather Jesus is reframing this commandment, so that his disciples and we can better understand it. This commandment is about love and relationship – not about judgment and tyranny.

This is not to say that this commandment is easy. “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you.” To love with this kind of holy love means to be willing to let go of even one’s life for another. Henri Nouwen said,

I want you to understand a little better what happened between Adam and me. Maybe I can say it very simply. Adam taught me about God’s love in a very concrete way. First of all, he taught me that being is more important than doing, that God wants me to be with God and not do all sorts of things to prove that I am valuable [so Adam taught Henri about friendship with God]. My whole life had been doing, doing, doing, so people would finally recognize that I was okay... Here I was with Adam and Adam said, “I don’t care what you do as long as you will be with me.” It wasn’t easy just to be with Adam. It isn’t easy to simply be with a person without accomplishing much.”

There are three important points to be gleaned about Holy Friendship:

The first point is that this type of friendship is based on our relationship with God, although often our friendship with God grows and deepens through our friendship with another person. But the center, the fulcrum so to speak of this type of friendship, is God. It is not a friendship of utility, whereby we hope to gain something concrete from knowing a person – something like status, or connections, or good appearance, or power. It is not a friendship necessarily based on the power of attraction or desire. It is a friendship based on the love we have experienced through God’s grace.

Second, a holy friendship is based on a completely different understanding of mutuality and give and take. In most societies, people are friends with others who are a lot like themselves. We have a natural need for security and we often find security with those with whom we have something in common. However, look at the friendship between God and Moses, or between Jesus and his disciples, or between Nouwen and Adam. Judging by outward appearances, there are huge imbalances of power and “strength” in these friendships. John Swinton, who is a professor of theology at University of Aberdeen, writes:

In the incarnation [of God in Jesus], one finds God willingly entering into friendship with his creatures who could never be his equal. In the earthly life and ministry of Jesus one finds a continuing picture of a man entering into friendships not with social equals, but with those whom society had downgraded and considered unworthy of friendship. In the death of Jesus one discovers a man committed to these same friendships even unto death.²

However, Nouwen learns something remarkable in his friendship with Adam. In his own words, Nouwen discovered that, “...handicapped people are the ones who sometimes bring you in touch with your own handicaps. They remind you of something that you don’t want to be reminded of. They remind you of the brokenness of humanity and also of your own humanity. You say, ‘No, no, I’m fine.’” Gradually you discover that if you allow yourself to be with them, they reveal

² Swinton, John. Resurrecting the Person: Friendship and the Care of People with Mental Health Problems. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000, pp 45-46.

your handicap to you. They also reveal to you that your handicap may become the gateway to knowing yourself better, to knowing God better and to knowing life better.”

Jesus minced no words, to be his friend and therefore God’s friends, we have to love one another, with God’s self-emptying kind of love. To love one another, we may have to give up our life, or at least our definition of what we believe life is about. But in this love Jesus says we will find something far greater than ourselves – we will find joy. The joy that comes with friendship, the joy that comes with responding to God’s love, and the joy that comes with allowing God to dwell in the center of all our relationships.

It is with that kind of love we come to this table, as God’s friends and therefore each other’s friends, to join together in communion. Here all our perceived differences drop away and we become one in Christ, holy friends. We are invited to the table, because we claim our friendship in Christ. Our challenge is to make this friendship real in our daily lives, beyond just the time we take to share in the Lord’s Supper. In doing so, we bear the real fruit of the kingdom that comes from abiding in the vine. *“This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, than to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you.”*