

The Park Road Pulpit

Sermons from Park Road Baptist Church

Russ and Amy Jacks Dean, Pastors

Schools of the Heart

John 15.12-17

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This story is told by our Theology professor, Dr. Frank Tupper. Steve Shoemaker, the pastor of Myers Park Baptist Church here in Charlotte used to be the pastor of Crescent Hill Baptist Church in Louisville, KY. Dr. Tupper was a member of his congregation. One Sunday Dr. Tupper decided to let Steve know what he was thinking about the sermon – you know how folks like to give their back door critique. Dr. Tupper said, “I didn’t come to hear a sweet Jesus sermon.” To which Steve replied, “Frank, I wasn’t preaching to you today.” Dr. Tupper tells that story as an “aha” moment for him. That worship was about God and about community. It wasn’t just about him. I tell that to say – if you didn’t come here today for a sweet Jesus sermon – then I’m not preaching to you today. But I do believe that there are some among us who need to hear this word.

Russ has kicked off a fall sermon series looking at some of the names and titles of Jesus. Today I get Jesus as “friend.” Feel free to hum “What a Friend We Have in Jesus” quietly in your heart while I talk if that will help. To talk in terms of Jesus as my friend seems almost sappy. This has all the makings of a sweet Jesus sermon for sure. Try as I might to picture Jesus with his friends – as one of the guys – it’s simply an image that doesn’t come very easily. He seems a cut above – never aloof, but always interested in the other. But in my mind’s eye he doesn’t allow himself to be vulnerable with his followers. He remains for all-time pure and pristine and almost above the need for friendship.

Yet this cannot be the case. Time and time again, he calls his disciples friends. And then, in John's gospel, Jesus spells out what it means to be a friend. "The word translated 'friend' (philos) in vv. 13-15 is from the verb 'to love' (phileo). The Fourth Gospel uses the two Greek verbs for 'love' (agapao and phileo) interchangeably, so when Jesus speaks of friends here, he is really saying 'those who are loved.' The English noun 'friend' does not fully convey the presence of love that undergirds the Johannine notion of friendship. Verse 14 makes it even clear that Jesus is not simply appealing to the noble ideal of friendship in v.13, but to an understanding of friendship wholly grounded in Jesus' particular love. A comparison of 14.15 and 21 with 15.14 suggests that to be Jesus' friend and to love Jesus are synonymous, because both are defined as keeping Jesus' commandments." (New Interpreter's Bible, Vol. IX, Gail R. O'Day, page 758)

We have taken the word "friend" and used it interchangeably for "acquaintance." In the instant messaging world almost anyone can be labeled your BFF (Best Friend Forever). To say we're "good friends" may mean that our families have had dinner together a few times or our kids may go to school together, but we certainly wouldn't vacation with them and the very last thing we'd want to do is to really share our lives with them – honesty and openness and transparency and vulnerability. When we think about it – there are very few people with whom we can have that kind of relationship. Along the way we have cheapened the word "friend." The ways that we use the word are far from how Jesus used it.

John says *to lay down ones life for one's friend*. We have picked up this scene with Jesus and his friends right in the middle. If we go back to the beginning of chapter 15 we get the famous soliloquy about vines and branches – Jesus said, *"I am the vine and you are the branches."* "The image of community that emerges from John 15.1-17 is one of

interrelationship, mutuality, and indwelling. To get the full sense of this interrelationship, it is helpful to visualize what the branches of a vine actually look like. [Not tree branches.] In a vine, branches are almost completely indistinguishable from one another; it is impossible to determine where one branch stops and another branch starts. All run together as they grow out of the central vine. What this vine image suggests about community, then, is that there are no free-standing individuals in community, but branches who encircle one another completely . . . What matters for John is that each individual is rooted in Jesus (ah, sweet Jesus) and hence gives up individual status to become one of many encircling branches. The communal life envisioned in the vine metaphor raises a strong challenge to contemporary Western models of individual autonomy and privatism . . . To live according to this model, then, the church would be a community in which members are known for the acts of love that they do in common with all other members. It would not be a community built around individual accomplishments . . . The Johannine metaphor undercuts any celebration of individual gifts, and this, too, challenges contemporary Western understandings . . . Were the church to live as the branches of Christ, individual distinctiveness would give way to the common embodiment of love. The distinctiveness of the community would derive solely from its relationship to God and Jesus, not the characteristic or even gifts of its members. The mark of the faithful community is how it loves, not who are its members.”

(New Interpreter's Bible, Vol. IX, Gail R. O'Day, page 760-761)

So as we leave this vine/branches imagery – that's when Jesus launches into: *no one has greater love than this – to lay down ones' life for one's friend. You are my friends . . . I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.* The bottom line is this – Jesus was built for community. We are made for belonging. It is perhaps one of the greatest gifts of The Church – (capital C), and it is perhaps one of the greatest aspects of this church. Community.

Belonging. Connected. Together as the Body of Christ – embodying one of the attributes of Jesus – living in friendship with one another. Giving of self for the other. Jean Vanier puts it this way: “More and more people are alone. Is it not essential, then, to encourage the creation and growth of places of belonging? If these intermediaries between people and society, these schools of the heart, do not exist, people will find it more and more difficult to achieve maturity.” (Weavings, Volume XX, Number 3, May/June 2005, Jean Vanier, pages 24-25)

It is my belief that when Church is at its best it could be one of those “schools of the heart.” It has been our pastoral intention to recreate this church to grow even more into a “school of the heart.” It is my hope that more and more people will not only enroll, but become teachers in this endeavor.

I want you to know that I have witnessed Park Road Baptist Church as a School of the Heart just this weekend. Friday I got the call from Kenny Edwards that his wife Mary had been taken to the hospital. In her early 50’s now, Mary has battled MS for almost 30 years. Completely immobile with frequent seizures, Kenny and I had spoken several times last week about Mary’s rapidly declining condition. Friday’s call was the indication that the end of this life was near for Mary. When I got to the hospital, two of Mary’s friends were at her side – Betsy Marik and Jan Burlison. I stayed with Mary while they got some dinner. And they returned to keep their watch. Waiting on death is holy time. Sacred time. Slow and tense time. But they and we did it with plenty of laughter intermingled with our tears. I left at 8:00 Friday night. These two friends – Friends – stayed. Linda Hefner came while I was there. Anne Hunter Eidson arrived to help keep watch. David and Beth Jackson got there later in the evening. And we and they all told the same story – about how her breathing was so irregular. So many times I would have sworn that Mary had taken her last breath . . . until finally she would breathe again. And

then, about 11:30 Friday night – she woke up. She talked, she drank water. There she was surrounded by friends. Betsy stayed through the night. When I got there Sat afternoon, Jan was there to relieve Betsy's shift. Keeping watch. Whispering "I love you" into Mary's ear. Praying her into the Blessed Hope of Forever God/Forever Peace.

I don't know how this story ends. As of this moment, Mary is still holding her own. What the next hours, days, and weeks hold, I cannot say. One of the jobs of pastor and preacher is this: I stand here today to bear witness to what I saw: If you want to know where Jesus is today –if you want to see Jesus, in person, if you want to experience the Resurrected One - go to room 4902 of Carolinas Medical Center. He is there serving as friend. Today he looks an awful lot like 2 women that are a part of Park Road Baptist Church's School of the Heart.

If you didn't come here to hear this sweet Jesus story about what it means to lay down your life for your friend, then this sermon was not for you today. Jesus – who embodied the love of God like no other – is known to us as Friend. To me that is a sermon that is for everyone. May it be so.