

## ABIDING FRIENDSHIP

John 15: 9-17; May 9, 2021; Union Congr. Church, United Church of Christ

Rev. Robin Raudabaugh

Abiding is an unusual word. Not a word we use often in everyday language. And yet, a word Jesus used to convey a profound sense of wellbeing, support, comfort, care, and compassion. When we were looking for images for the church bulletin this week to portray abiding, this image of a mother swan with her two babies seemed to show some of those qualities.

In the Inclusive Language Bible, the version read by John this morning, the words 'live in' are substituted for 'abide'. Instead of Jesus saying, 'Abide in me as I abide in you'. He says 'live in me as I live in you.' And while that most likely is a good translation, those words don't quite convey for me the same sense of immersion into one another in the way that I think about abide.

Jesus understanding about abiding in and with one another was directly linked to his understanding about friendship. Abiding or living in one another led to a friendship not based on leader/follower or teacher/student or boss/subordinate.

I was taught that clergy should not – cannot be friends with their congregants. This idea is reinforced at our regularly mandated clergy boundary trainings. These trainings emphasize that in addition to avoiding inappropriate romantic liaisons with parishioners, we are also to avoid any position that requires our parishioners to take care of us. We are supposed to take care of them. And we are to get our care from outside the church we are serving.

As pastors we are cautioned that we should not be friends with our congregations, because friendship leads to complications. Friendship leads to conflicts of interest. Boundaries are blurred, expectations become messy. We are warned by those who know – seasoned clergy - perhaps from their own experience – that part of the reason for avoiding closer relationships is that congregants feel their 'friendship' with the pastor should grant them special status – and are especially upset when it does not.

Experienced pastors can tell all kinds of stories of messy relationships such as sharing a personal confidence only to find it gossip fodder or even worse being used as a way to punish or get back at the pastor.

Friendship between pastors and parishioners certainly has its pitfalls. And yet, in this text from the gospel of John, after reminding his disciples to abide in him as he abides in them, Jesus goes on to explain to them, “I don’t call you subordinates any longer, I call you friends.” He intentionally blurs the boundary between them. He erases the power differential between them. He tells them that just as they live in him, he lives in them. They are all equals now in the sight of God. The barriers between Rabbi and disciple, between leader and follower, between Savior and saved are dissolved. Jesus creates a new understanding of reciprocity, of mutuality, of shared vulnerability between them. He needs them as they need him. Not more or less. Same.

I am certainly not Jesus and I don’t pretend to be. I’m not Jesus but I do try in my everyday life to not only be a follower of Jesus, but an imitator of Jesus. Sometimes I do pretty well, sometimes I just do okay, and often I fail abjectly. I am very aware of the danger of believing that as pastor, I am somehow above my congregation. I am also very aware of the fallacy that as pastor I have a direct line to God that is not available to you. I do often wonder sometimes, though if having such rigid boundaries as we as clergy are taught to maintain, actually reinforce the ideas and perceptions that lead congregations to put clergy on pedestals. And once those clergy are put up there on that lonely pedestal – it is also easier to artificially create a *you and us* delineation – and it is easier when conflict arises to not experience an ‘we are all in this together’ understanding – and seek to knock that pastor on the pedestal off.

I certainly do not want to be up on any pedestal – and I’m fairly certain that all of you are quite aware of that. I am also very aware that there is – whether we choose to recognize it or not - a power differential between us as pastor and congregation. I am also aware that several of you have regularly reminded me that you not only think of me as your pastor, but also your friend. And I like knowing that – I do – but/and – I also know that it then becomes fully my responsibility to never forget – that there is a power differential – and it is my responsibility to honor and maintain it.

So – can we be friends? I sure hope so. Right now, think about those persons you count as your friends. Do you share the same confidences with all of them? Do you do the same activities with all of them?

Do you have similar likes and dislikes with all of them? I’m guessing not. We have different kinds of friends. We have work friends, church friends, school friends, party friends, running or camping friends, gardening friends, fishing or hunting friends.

We – hopefully – have at least one friend we know we could call in the middle of the night to come pick us up from God-knows-where our car broke down to rescue us and bring us home – no questions asked – at least not at the time. We have friends we share very little in common with except for something like we both like to ride horses at the state park – or we both go to the same church – or shop at the same clothing store. We have friends we share deep theological or philosophical discussions with. We have friends we share recipes with. We have friends we travel with or share travel stories with.

I do count you as my friends. Some of you I know well as we have shared similar activities and experiences. Some of you I hold in great regard for your wisdom and creativity, passion and compassion. Some of you I don't really know very well at all but I know how much this church means to you – and since I also know how much it means to me, I know we share a bond.

Jesus put himself in midst of his disciples – his dearest, closest friends. It didn't mean he was no longer their teacher. It didn't mean he wasn't still the Messiah. But it did mean that as he faced arrest, trial, and death, he was also aware of his deep need for support. He needed friends to be with him to love him, not just shove him back up on that pedestal expecting that he needed no one but himself and God.

I call you friends. I don't need you to be everything for me. But I do need to be a part of a faith community of love and forgiveness – and as long as I spend so much of my time and energy and passion in this church community, I cannot be a part of another one. I don't need you to be that friend that I'd call to rescue me in the middle of the night. I don't need or want – or should not need or want - you to be the one to whom I vent when I'm overwhelmed – but if I accidentally do – I hope that you will forgive me and encourage me to do better.

During the year that Gigi was going through her chemo treatments for cancer, I cannot tell you how relieved and grateful I was to be a part of a caring, compassionate, church community. Not a perfect community – but that is not what I'm talking about.

Several years ago when my mother was dying from a massive brain tumor – I was between churches. I didn't have a church community to love and support and pray for me and my family through that heartbreaking, difficult time. I became so aware of how much I count on my church community to understand at least a little of what I may be going through – not everything – but some.

I realized how much I count on knowing you are praying for me and my family, even when you may not even know I especially need it at any given time. I realized that there are things I may share with you and things I do not. And that is something I do with any of my friendships.

I believe that being a pastor makes me a better Christian. Not all the time, but most of the time. I know that I am humbled and exalted by getting to be a constant witness to the compassion, generosity, and care for one another we have. I know that too, I am a witness to the times we are less than that – when we hurt and in turn are mean or spiteful or hurtful - and yet, we mostly manage to still love and care for and help bring out the best in one another. I have never thought church is or should be the place where perfect humans gather and I believe it is foolish to expect that it should be. Church is where imperfect people gather to learn and listen, to pray and praise, and in the process to become better. It is the place we learn to forgive one another – over and over. It is the place we learn to let go of real or imagined hurts and start over with hopeful friendship again.

I don't show everything about who I am to you, my congregation. But I do allow myself to be vulnerable, to share that I am not perfect or even close. I am willing to let you know my weaknesses – my shortcomings – even as I want you to know my strengths. I - possibly more than many pastors, allow boundaries to blur a bit. I believe living in ambiguity makes us not weaker, but stronger. I know this can lead to you knowing how human I really am – how imperfect I am – and this might lead you to believe that I am not quite as close to God as those other pastors you know and have known.

I need my congregation's friendship to know that the church's ministry is more than my profession. I believe that my willingness to be vulnerable makes me a better pastor. I want and need to be a part of a congregation that recognizes and respects my role and responsibility – and yet understands that I don't need or want to be at the center or front of any action.

I am intentional about relaxing these boundaries – in response to this very text of Jesus, "I call you friends." I do call you friends and I hope that you return that favor.