

The Sixth Sunday of Easter-Year B-The Rev. Jennifer B. Cleveland 5.5.24

You are my friends...Abide in my love. I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything I have heard from my Father.

On my way to the Bishop Candidates Meet and Greet at St. Thomas, Medina, on Thursday night, I received a phone call from a friend with whom I had not spoken to in over four years. I answered the phone with some trepidation: hopeful that she was calling to report some happy news, but unsure. You never know, especially if it has been awhile since you've talked with someone. After exchanging greetings and expressing joy at hearing one another's voices for the first time in a long time, she explained, "I thought I'd call because I thought of you earlier today." I asked her what she was up to and she started to update me on details of her life—her job, her travels, her daughter, her dog (you know—interesting stuff)—but then she interrupted herself and said, "Actually, that isn't important right now. That isn't what I want to talk about. I want to let you know that Jesus is my friend. How Jesus is present for me and how that has changed everything." Immediately, the conversation took a different turn from just checking in and updating one another on our lives to focusing on matters of the heart.

Just a little while later, I listened to the candidates for bishop reflect from their own hearts on really big questions concerning the Episcopal Church in Western Washington. Over 220 questions were submitted from people across the Diocese for the candidates to consider and 25 were ultimately chosen for them to respond to during the Meet and Greets. On Thursday night, the questions included: How might you grow and support teen and young adult ministries? How do you support people who have been historically marginalized by the church, such as BIPOC (Black Indigenous People of Color), those who identify as LGBTQIA+, and women? What experience do you have developing a large budget and making hard choices? (People laughed nervously at that question.) And finally, in what ways must we in the church shift in a culture that doesn't understand or support Christianity? These and questions posed at other Meet and Greets are not for the faint of heart. It's an understatement to say we (the church and the world) are in a time of unrest, outcry and anxiety. The ground has been and is shifting, and what seems most certain is the uncertainty.

You are my friends...Abide in my love.

It is in a time of unrest and shifting ground and certain uncertainty that we hear these words from the gospel today. To give you the context into which Jesus spoke, this is part of his long parting speech to his companions in John. By the time Jesus gets to this part, he has washed their feet, broken bread with them for the last time, and given them a new commandment to love one another. They are in a moment (the moment) before tensions peak and Jesus is taken off to be killed. And it is in that moment when Jesus says, *You are my friends, abide in my love.* Some, many might have said at the time and some might say now, *This is not the time for any of us to dwell on something as basic as being friends with Jesus. The time for abiding in love is past.*

Just like my ears and heart perked up the moment my friend said, *I wanted to call to let you know that I have come to understand Jesus as my friend*, I wonder if the disciples ears and hearts perked up at *You are my friends*. With all the unrest that was going on around them, I wonder if they understood that the real shift they were being asked to understand was that shift from identifying who was in and who was out to *You are my friends*. From focusing on who mattered most or who was more right to *abiding*. It would be awhile before they would say, *Being friends with Jesus has changed everything*.

Our ties with Celtic Christianity run deep here at St. Augustine's, a connection we'll be reminded of [at the 10:30 // in just a few short minutes when we pray for those departing on pilgrimage to Ireland this week.] More prayers for more pilgrims headed to Ireland will take place next week. There are a lot of pilgrims from St. Augustine's headed to Ireland within the next week or so! Friendship is so central to Celtic spiritual expression. And not just any type of friendship, but soul friendship. The poet-theologian John O'Donohue described soul friends this way: *In the early Celtic church, a person who acted as a teacher, companion, or spiritual guide was called [a soul friend,] an anam cara. It originally referred to someone to whom you confessed, revealing the hidden intimacies of your life. With the anam cara you could share your innermost self, your mind and your heart. This friendship was an act of recognition and belonging...[and] friendship cut across all convention, morality, and category. You were joined in an ancient and eternal way with the "friend of your soul."* (*Anam Cara: A Book of Celtic Wisdom*, John O'Donohue) Anam cara cuts across space and time and creatures, too. We talk, of course, about Jesus as our friend (some of us might even remember singing *What a friend we have in Jesus*), but here, Jesus so clearly says, "You all are my *anam cara*. I have shared my innermost self with you, my mind and my heart. All that the Father has shown me."

Soul friendships cut across space and time. Those who knew Bob Erb [whose life we are celebrating as part of this service // whose life we celebrated as part of the 8:00 Eucharist] all saw a different side of Bob's friendship with Jesus. I did not know Bob when he handed out mugs of coffee for all who came to the 8:00 or when he and Shirley brought deviled eggs and sausages. I wasn't here with Bob and Shirley and the family when they grieved their son and sibling Philip, whose ashes are also in the Columbarium. But I did have the opportunity to sing with Bob and Elizabeth one day last August. Not during a service, but on Bob's last visit to St. Augustine's. Bob did not need a hymnal to sing some of the hymns we are singing today. We came into the nave. Bob went up front and we sang together, *a capella*, with Bob carrying the tune and directing the singing with his arms and his hands. And he was beautiful, filled with all of who he was and is, with Jesus and in Jesus, an *anam cara* of Jesus.

In Acts, Peter—who was present at that supper with Jesus—finally learned that being friends, an *anam cara*, with Jesus changes everything. He didn't fully learn it while he was walking with Jesus, day in and day out, jostling to be the best, most perfect disciple. But he finally learned it. How do we know? Through that little sentence in Acts. *Those who were with Peter were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out **even** on the Gentiles*. It's one thing to say the Holy Spirit had been poured

out on the Gentiles. That speaks to how the Spirit was widely shared. But to say that the Holy Spirit is poured out **even** on the Gentiles is to speak of radical, wild inclusion. It was poured out **even** on that person or those people. The ones we cannot imagine being considered friends of Jesus are not only friends, but *anam cara*. How do we know that Peter got it? Because basically he says, *Do not stand in the way of God's abundance. There is no inner circle. No gatekeepers. No bouncers. No deciding who is worthy and who is not. No expulsions. No exclusions. No fine print disclaimers. Hang on to your hats, folks. The Holy Spirit is indiscriminately poured out on all, so we better start blessing and pouring the life-giving waters as fast as we can.* We might say Peter finally understood Easter. How it wasn't really about him choosing Jesus, but about seeing that Jesus had already drawn the wide circle, already said, *You are my friends [my anam cara]...Abide in my love. I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything I have heard from my Father.*