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May 5, 2024

Fifth Sunday of Easter

“Thank You for Being a Friend” based on John 15:9-17

⁹ As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. ¹⁰ If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love. ¹¹ I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.

¹² “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. ¹³ No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. ¹⁴ You are my friends if you do what I command you. ¹⁵ I do not call you servants^(a) any longer, because the servant^(b) does not know what the master is doing, but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. ¹⁶ You did not choose me, but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. ¹⁷ I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.

This is the Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

As I mentioned in the E-News on Friday, I am a devoted fan of the Golden Girls. I believe many of you share this sentiment, having grown up with these iconic characters. We all remember the humor and humanity that was woven into every episode. Each woman, with her unique personality, brought something special to the group. The snarky one from Sicily, the flirtatious Southern Belle, the sharp-tongued disciplinarian, and of course, Rose. (deep, happy sigh.) Rose Nyland...the blessed child of God hailing from Saint Olaf but claiming dual citizenship in our hearts. Played by America’s Grandmother, Betty White, Rose was the bright spot of naivety that bound the Golden Girls together, just like the cheesecake straight out of the fridge.

Known for her long-winded stories and childlike cheerfulness, Rose was notorious for sharing stories that made us wonder...huh? I’m not quite sure of a polite opposite of “sharp as a tack,” but Rose Nylund appeared to be just that, with quips such as “It’s like we say in St. Olaf—Christmas without fruitcake is like St. Sigmund’s Day without the headless boy.” Or “You know what they say: you can lead a herring to water, but you have to walk really fast or he’ll die.” I can’t count the number of times Rose left me scratching my head. As we say in Texas, bless her heart.

I wonder if there is a Rose in every friend group. That friend who has the absolute best of intentions at heart but who doesn’t always make the most intelligent decisions. Kind of like Peter. Time and time again, the Gospels tell us of Peter’s foibles. Dedicated to being the best follower and student, Peter hangs on Jesus’s every word, ready to spring into action to prove he gets it.

And time and time again, Peter proves he does not, leaving us all scratching our heads. Leaving Jesus scratching his head. Like when Peter jumped off the boat to run on the water to reach Jesus but then forgot to walk in faith? Or how about when Peter thought he was “helping” by

keeping the little children away from Jesus, only to be taught that the kingdom of heaven belongs to the little ones? Oh, or the time Peter balks at having his feet washed by Jesus, fell asleep in the garden, and then denied knowing Jesus at all...three times! Bless his heart.

But no matter how often Peter had Jesus rolling his eyes, biting his tongue, or rebuking a rebuke, Peter kept coming back, trying again to please his teacher, to get it right, to prove to everyone that he understood the assignment. And in our passage today, Jesus gives credit where credit is due. Even with all the missteps, Jesus gathered his disciples and shared the meaning of true friendship.

“I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. ¹⁶ You did not choose me, but I chose you.”

This distinction, this upgrade from students to friends, the Greek ‘*philo*’ is a major relationship advancement for Peter and the disciples, as this is the same term of endearment that Jesus uses to speak of his friend, Lazarus, for whom he wept. Jesus had let Peter and the disciples into his heart, allowing himself to be vulnerable in their presence, trusting in their intentions and their confidences, and proving that being true friends isn’t just swapping bracelets and spilling tea. Friendship brings comfort when hurting, understanding when learning, and often the hardest of them...tough love when messing up.

Thirteen times in the gospels, Peter messes up, sometimes with small misunderstandings and sometimes making decisions that need repercussions. Later, Peter gives up, getting completely overwhelmed by his own sin and weakness, and quits the team to go back to his comfort zone...fishing.

But this is where Jesus teaches us how to be a friend. No matter how often he was disappointed, frustrated, or even angry with Peter, Jesus showed his friend true kindness by repeating, rewording, and reteaching. Even when Peter rebuked Jesus for speaking of his impending death, Jesus loved his friend with kindness.

There is a vast difference between the two...kindness and niceness. We all know that being nice means to be pleasing, agreeable, delightful. But being kind, according to Dr. Marcia Sirota, a psychiatrist and author of *Be Kind, Not Nice: How to Stop People-Pleasing, Build Your Confidence and Discover Your Authentic Self*¹, means to exhibit behavior that’s “thoughtful, caring and considerate, but also strong, confident and self-caring. On the surface, an act of kindness can look similar to an act of niceness, but ...while a nice person might go to great lengths to gain approval from others (potentially even causing harm in the process), a kind person engages in generous acts built on a foundation of self-love.

“They don’t tolerate mistreatment or disrespect. They have good boundaries, and they feel comfortable saying ‘no.’”

I wonder if this is what Jesus was referring to when he said, “I do not call you servants any longer... but I have called you friends.” That being friends is more about the promise of being kind than being nice. More about giving tough love than placations or appeasements. Doing

¹ https://www.huffpost.com/entry/nice-kind-difference_l_650b53ffe4b0d75184692b0e#:~:text=%E2%80%9CKindness%20moves%20beyond%20feelings%20and,rarely%20makes%20a%20lasting%20difference.

things out of love, not out of pride. Saying ‘no’ instead of condoning, enabling, or ignoring bad behaviors.

Thirteen times, Jesus told Peter no, in various ways, as an act of true kindness for his friend. Even when Peter threw in the towel, ready to walk away from everything, Jesus never gave up on his friend...never gave up on the wonderful things Peter would accomplish in the future.

In life or in his death, Jesus never gave up on Peter. And through his death, Jesus promises to never give up on us. No matter how many times we fumble, foible, or fail...no matter how many times we deny, rebuke, jump to conclusions, or create more “bless your heart” moments for those around us, God gives us the ultimate kindness of loving us through our mistakes. Sometimes with a love-filled no, sometimes with a chance for a do-over. Not unlike what Jesus afforded Peter.

Not long after he had risen from the dead, three times, Jesus asked Peter, “Do you love me?” Almost as if Jesus was giving Peter a chance to re-do his three denials.

Each time Peter said, “Yes, I love you, Lord.” Promising to feed and care for the flock. And Peter did just that...by standing and preaching on the birth-day of the church at Pentecost. But that’s a sermon for two weeks from now.

Today, we celebrate the church that was built upon Peter's faith and foibles as we remember that we are all like Peter, like Rose, from time to time. We all rely on the kindness of our friend who has promised never to give up, turn away, reject, rebuke, or deny even when we do. Our friend, who loves us so much that we have no choice but to love in return, calls us to love those around us, not by being nice but by being kind through empathy, connection, and generosity. And we do that today as we come to the table to share a sacred meal with our friend.

To him, we are grateful. To him, we are saved. To him, we can say...” thank you for being a friend.”

Let us pray.

Gracious heavenly friend, we offer you our thanks, praise, and love through Jesus Christ our Lord, who gave himself for us. Thank you for your holy church, which you sustain with your powerful, life-giving word. Bless your church throughout the world so that all your people may celebrate today and all days with those around us whom we are called to serve and love with true faith and kindness. Amen.