

Blacksburg Presbyterian Church  
Sunday, May 17, 2009  
Rev. William L. Love

## I HAVE CALLED YOU FRIENDS

Acts 10:44-48  
1 John 5:1-6  
John 15:9-17

The first pastorate I served was a small church in a county that was almost entirely rural and one of the poorest counties in North Carolina. The community was on the edge of a 115,000 acre swamp.

Other than right off the main highway, the residents of the county did not get electricity until after World War II. Phone service did not become common until the 1960's.

There was no cable television service. The only channels were two local channels in Wilmington. Except when the network programs were airing, the quality of the available viewing ranged between lackluster and poor.

One Sunday night, I was unwinding from the day by watching TV. After the network programming went off the air, I was watching a TV evangelist.

His show was low-budget. Just a single fixed camera — without elaborate backdrops or a studio audience.

He faced the camera at a slight angle. He was a rotund man who wore a three-piece suit and held a Bible in one hand, kind of tucked under his arm.

As he began to talk, he spoke normally. As he spoke, he got more and more involved in his message. One arm began to pump, and his voice took on the clipped, breathy cadence of a revival preacher. As he got more and more involved, the other arm, too, would begin to pump.

When he had both arms pumping and his voice rising with increasing fervor, you knew that you were getting the heart of the message he had to deliver that night.

One night, with both arms pumping and his voice at fever pitch, he said — and this is an exact quote; I don't think I will ever forget it — he said, *Be sure to obey God now because one day you will want God to obey you.*

He said to obey God, so that one day you will be in a position to give an order that God will have no choice but to obey. He not only said that it is possible — but it was **desirable** — that we should maneuver ourselves into a position to give God an order with God's having no choice but to *snap to*.

He was, of course, referring to his view that you could arrive at the pearly gates and tell God that there was no choice but to admit you.

This TV evangelist forgot a few things — not the least of which were to trust God and the sufficiency of the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ.

He did, however, hit at least one nail on the head. His idea that we can, by our good deeds, so obligate God that God has no choice but to honor our request — to obey us — gets to the heart of **works righteousness**, that notion that we can somehow earn our salvation, that we can make ourselves so adorable that God has no choice but to love us, that God's choosing of us is because we have somehow proven ourselves to be worthy.

It is, of course, **nonsense**.

There are some things we can make happen. There are some things that happen to us.

When we were in school, we completed our assignments, passed the tests, completed the courses required satisfactorily. The day we walked across the stage to receive the diploma, we were not being given a gift. The diploma merely recognized what we had achieved by our own effort. We had made that happen.

When we buy a house or a car, we enter an agreement. When we have met the terms of that agreement, we receive title to the house or the car. It matters not whether the lending institution thinks we are adorable or not. When we have done what is required, they have no choice but to give us title. That was within our power to do, and we made it happen.

We are people, who — by our education (formal or otherwise), our upbringing, our dealing with the world as we find it — have met with much success. We are people who are able to make a great many things happen.

The story of Jacob is a story of a man who could make things happen.

When he wanted the birthright of the first born, he took action to get his brother Esau to sell it for a bowl of soup. When it came time for the blessing of Isaac, he took action to deceive his father and receive the blessing and the inheritance.

Though his father-in-law tricked Jacob into marrying both Leah and Rachel, Jacob outwitted Laban and built his own herds with strong animals, leaving Laban the feeble ones.

Though the way he operated scarcely revealed a high moral character, Jacob could make things happen.

Some things he could make happen. Some things happened to him.

At Bethel, something happened to Jacob when he had the dream of the ladder and God renewed his promise that, by him and his descendants, all the families of the earth shall be blessed.

God's choosing of Jacob — certainly more in spite of him than because of him — was something that happened to Jacob.

We are people who can make things happen. There are also things that happen to us. And those things that happen to us are finally things that we can never make happen.

God's choosing of us is one of those things. The TV evangelist did not understand that. We can never make ourselves so attractive, so adorable, so lovable that we are, of ourselves, so irresistible that God has no choice but to love us.

For one thing, even before we make the attempt, God has already chosen to love us.

Christ said: *You did not choose me, but I chose you.*

Christ went to the cross for us, because Christ chose to go to the cross for us. God loves us because God chooses to love us.

That is a gift — not an obligation — a **gift!** Love is a gift, or it is not love at all. It may be reciprocity, or desperately clinging need, or a feigned intimacy for fear of being alone. If you are talking about the evangelist's view that we can present God with the works we call obedient and God must exchange them for salvation, you may be talking about some kind of high level horse trading. Love is a gift.

If you can remember back to the very first loves of childhood (or crush, or whatever name you now choose to call it), you may remember the extent to which you went to try to endear yourself to that special one whom you had chosen to be the focus of your love.

Boys began to comb hair and straighten clothes, do some deed to attract attention as Tom Sawyer did for Becky Thatcher. Girls did whatever they do to catch boys' eyes.

If love is returned, we may assume our efforts have caused or created the affection. As, in youth, we go through perhaps several such loves, we may find that our clever antics and cunning wiles do not always work.

We may even learn that whatever love comes our way comes as much in spite of our efforts as because of them. The love comes because, for some reason, the one who loves us chooses to love us. Our best efforts to engender it do not guarantee love. And if the wrong person chooses to love us, our efforts to frustrate it scarcely work either, as *Fatal Attraction* (perhaps the quintessential stalking movie) and the plethora of stalking stories we hear and read about give testimony.

That is true, too, of loves of longer standing.

If you think of your spouse and the ways your spouse has committed his or her life to yours, ask yourself what you could have done to deserve that, what there is in you that **could** deserve that.

The answer, of course, is nothing. We may be able to think of all kinds of admirable things about ourselves that make us loveable. We could find the same, or similar, admirable qualities in others. Your spouse does not love the others. Your spouse loves you. Nothing in us can earn love or obligate others to love us.

They do. That is a gift your spouse gives to you.

It is there when you are your most loveable. It is there when you are not.

If your spouse ever chooses to stop loving you, there is nothing you can do that can make him or her love you. That makes the gift a little frightening because that gift is beyond your control.

When we are people who have the ability to make things happen, we trust that ability, and it becomes difficult to trust those things that happen to us. We try to find a way to guarantee — to obligate — those gifts by our own power, as we do with the things we earn.

Though we cannot obligate love (none of us can; it is a gift to us), we **can** trust it and depend on it.

Christ said, *You did not choose me, but I chose you.*

Christ chose the cross for our salvation. That is God's gift. God loves us because God chooses to love us.

The TV evangelist could never quite trust that. He could never quite accept God's gift. He wanted to try to obligate God. That is always a temptation for those of us who are used to achieving things and of trusting those things we can make happen.

God's love is something that happens to us. God's choosing us is something that happens to us. We can trust it; we can depend on it, perhaps all the more, because no failure of ours can lose it.

A good friend of mine told me that the hardest thing she ever had to deal with was her husband telling her about his drinking: *It's my problem. It's got to be my solution. So back off!*

If they believed her behavior in the marriage was the cause of his sobriety, she would never be free from the tedious anxiety of never doing anything to lose his sobriety. If she had a bad day and snapped at him and he took a drink, it would be her fault.

If we believe we earn God's love, we are never free from the tedious anxiety of never doing anything to lose God's love.

The husband chose sobriety for himself, resisting his wife's attempts to "love" him so well that he would not drink. He gave her a great gift. She did not obligate his sobriety, and if she has a bad day and snaps at him, she cannot lose it. So she is as well set free to love him freely and care for him appropriately.

God chose to love us, resisting our attempts to obligate that love. We did not earn it, and no failing of ours can lose it. And so we can accept God's love and be set free to love God freely and to follow him appropriately.

Christ said: *You did not choose me...I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit.*

Christ also gives us an idea of how to carry out the task to which he has appointed us. He said: *You are my friends if you do what I command you. No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing, but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from the Father, I have made known to you.*

We know something of friendship. Our friends are those whom we know well, for whom reciprocity carries no weight (no repaying tit for tat, favor for favor; we simply do not bother to count), those who feel comfortable with us, with whom we feel comfortable. Friend is not a casual term. It describes a relationship that takes time to build.

Friends are also those people whom we, with no expectation of reward, befriend. Those people, perhaps strangers, toward whom we act as a friend would act.

There was a time that the words *friend* and *enemy* were public terms, derived from mutual protection and assistance pacts and treaties. The contemporary separation of the private sphere of life from the public sphere has relegated the word *friend* to the personal and private sphere.

The other time the word *friend* is used in relation to Jesus is in a public context when he is identified as the *friend of tax collectors and sinners*. And friendship in Christ — friendship with Christ — carries with it the public character of protection of and respect for others.

Christ calls us friends and is known as the friend of tax collectors and sinners. The key to bearing fruit is to continue and maintain the friendships that Christ formed on earth.

Jesus befriended those whom others would call failures and forgave them and brought a life that restored them to the life God intended for them. Jesus did not let the failings become a chasm between him and human beings. He bridged that distance in the crucifixion and resurrection.

In Christ, that bridge reached to us as well. And we are to continue those friendships.

Jesus did not befriend the easy ones. Even the Pharisees can do that, he said.

I have a cousin who says that the difficult people in our lives are the very ones to whom God sends us or sends to us. For Peter, it was Gentiles whom he regarded as *unclean*. In Acts 10, it was particularly the Roman centurion Cornelius.

The question for us is who the *unclean* are for us. Maybe it is homosexuals or people with AIDS. Maybe it's a co-worker or a member of our own family. Maybe it's members of our congregation with whom we have some unresolved disagreement. Maybe it's my own self.

They are the ones to whom Christ sends us. They are the ones Christ calls us to befriend.

Jesus has not kept us in the dark about this. Jesus has not kept secrets. Jesus had told us the whole mystery.

That's what friends do, so that we can look each other in the face, know we are accepted and respected and free, promise to walk with each other and be there for each other.

That's what friends do. And Jesus has called you friends.