

6th Sunday of Easter, May 10, 2015
Good Shepherd Episcopal Church
Centennial, Colorado
The Rev. Craig MacColl

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

The Mystery of Friendship

One beautiful, New England Sunday morning in the fall of 1969 the faculty and student body of the boarding school I was attending, awoke to discover that, during the night, someone had placed four, fifteen foot tall letters, spelling out the word “love” in the middle of the chapel lawn, which was in the center of the campus. As you can imagine, this caused quite a stir. What did it mean? Who was responsible for carrying out this act of “guerrilla art?” How could they possibly have put these giant letters there in the dead of night without anyone noticing?

Any one old enough will remember, that the fall of 1969 was not a time in our nation’s history when high school students were feeling much “love.” The assassinations of Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert Kennedy were still fresh in our minds. Many of my classmates had traveled to Washington D.C. the previous year to take part in the demonstrations against the Vietnam War as our nation struggled to find a way to extricate itself from this disaster. Student protests on college campuses were breaking out across the country.

Into this toxic political environment a rebellious, anti-establishment spirit was brewing, fueled by drugs and rock roll. Several of my friends had slogged through the mud of the Woodstock music festival the previous summer, returning with stories about legendary pop icons like Jimi Hendrix, the Grateful Dead, Crosby, Stills and Nash, Jefferson Airplane, Janis Joplin and Colorado’s own, Joe Cocker. If you’re too young to remember these events, be sure to go to the “1968” exhibit at the Colorado History Museum.

As it turns out, a small group of my classmates, secretly assisted by one faculty member, had spent several weeks planning and building what came to be known as the “LOVE sculpture.” They had built it with salvaged wood, plastic, wire mesh and paper, and stayed up for two whole days assembling

the letters. It was like a mini D-Day invasion – a massive group effort, carried out in complete secrecy.

What was surprising to me then and still surprises me today is that, amidst the prevailing mood of alienation, rebellion and disconnection that existed among my classmates, the LOVE sculpture became our legacy to the school. At the end of this month, our class, the class of 1970 will convene for our 45th reunion. And once again, we will convene on the chapel lawn to revisit and celebrate this event. This time, we will gather around a scaled down version of the original LOVE sculpture, created out of Styrofoam, and, just as we did so long ago, we will take part in an informal, outdoor Holy Eucharist...a “love feast” or “agape’ ” service as we called it in 1969.

How do these kinds of things happen? How is it that, amidst a communal atmosphere of anger, fear, and alienation, a spark of hope is kindled... a message of love is spelled out? I don't have the answer. All I know is that this seemingly random act of artistic expression has remained a symbol of the friendships and relationships that were formed almost a half-century ago when 100 young men from all over the United States began a four-year experiment in learning how to be a community. And those friendships continue today.

Several years ago, Rodney Stark, a sociologist from the University of Washington, wrote a book called the *Rise of Christianity*, in which he gave a theory as to why Christianity grew so successfully. It wasn't due to the coming of the Holy Spirit; it wasn't due to the preaching of Peter or Paul; it wasn't due to the fact that Constantine made Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire. The reason Christianity spread so well was because of networks of family and friends. Stark said that Christianity spread the “old fashioned” way – by proclaiming a God who cared and having a network of people who lived this faith in God by loving one another.

Over the years I have also found that most people who decide to join a church are drawn to it because of the friendship that is offered...because they find companionship with people who really care. And polls show that this counts more as a reason for joining a church than anything else.

When Jesus said, “you are my friends if you do what I command you,” he wasn’t talking about committing ourselves to a book of rules and rituals, and spending our days worrying whether we are making the grade. He meant that friendship with Him can be known only by those who are ready to be friendly to other people. The love which flows from God through Jesus to us reaches those who are prepared to show love – the unconditional love of Christ – to our neighbors, near and far. We can’t claim the friendship of Christ if there is no spark of friendliness in our approach to other people – whether it is a close relative, a visitor to our church, or the cashier at the neighborhood King Soopers.

But some people say, “Isn’t this kind of superficial?” It calls up images of smiley face stickers plastered everywhere. And many people cynically believe that what we really mean by friendship or fellowship is people who like to get together because they have the same interests....what one preacher describes as “cronyism with a halo.”

But Christian friendship is something quite different. Christian friendship doesn’t create a community of like-minded people. In the fellowship of a club or a pub, you choose your friends. But in the fellowship of the church, your friends are chosen for you. They aren’t necessarily people of similar interests or education or social background.

The challenge of being the church today is to witness to the fact that the only power that should bind us is the spirit of Christ. The hard part about Christian friendship, however, is that it takes a long time for us to appreciate the blessing of this kind of fellowship....a fellowship in which we didn’t choose our friends, but, rather, one where our friends were chosen for us by the power of the spirit of Christ that binds us. I think this is what has happened to my fellow prep-school classmates. We were thrown together, mostly through no choice of our own, in a time of alienation and disconnection. But 45 years later, we are still united by deep, mysterious ties of friendship.

So much about Christian friendship is hidden from view, only to appear much later as we look back on it. On this Mother’s Day we are reminded of

the many things our mothers did for us out of love that, at the time, we may not have understood or appreciated... things that we now realize have helped to make us the people we are.

At the end of our Gospel for today Jesus tells his disciples that he has appointed them to go out and bear fruit. Today, 2000 years later, we are still trying to grasp the truth of this blessing of friendship with Jesus. Like the reaction to that LOVE sculpture assembled on the chapel lawn of a New England boarding school in 1969, we are still trying to figure out what this four letter word really means and how this friendship love is lived out in our lives.

Maybe that's what keeps us coming back to church each week. Instead of giving in to the temptation to turn the church into a club of like-minded friends, we keep trying to understand the hidden blessing of Jesus' friendship love and to practice it in our daily lives. Where do you see the peculiar and mysterious blessing of Jesus' friendship love bearing fruit in your life? Where do you see this fellowship of love we call Good Shepherd Episcopal Church bearing fruit in the world around us? **Amen.**