

Reflection on the Word: May 6, 2018 (Easter 6) Acts 10:44-48; John 15:9-17

In the March 2018 issue of The United Church Observer, there were a series of stories titled "*Last Words*", in which writers shared final conversations with loved ones. Have you ever thought about the things you would say to family and friends, when with death approaching, you prepare to leave this life, as we know it?

In one of those stories, Sally Armstrong talks about her mother, Alma, who died just shy of her 95th birthday. She'd had a heart attack. The doctor explained that with the damage being so severe, she could not recover, but Alma hung on while the family gathered from afar. One even cut his honeymoon short to be with the beloved woman all the grandchildren called Gammie.

On one particular day, Alma was bright and cheerful, and was tucking into a cone of ice cream and admiring the fall colours while her daughter Sally pushed her wheelchair through the hospital garden.

The sun was just dipping behind the trees when mother turned to daughter and suddenly asked, "Do you remember the words carved into the mantelpiece of the fireplace at the cottage?"

"Yes," Sally replied. "Do you?" And as though her age and ailing heart meant nothing at all, Alma recited the words they had learned as children and cherished as adults: "Let the world wag on – here we take our ease."

Dusk was slipping in, and it was time to wheel her mother back to her room. Sally tucked her Mom into bed and stayed by her side until she was fast asleep. It was morning when the head nurse phoned and said, "Come quickly." Sally didn't get there in time. But later, she realized the last words her mother spoke to her were code for happy family times. "Let the world wag on – here we take our ease."

When we stand in the presence of death, we stand on holy ground, and last words often take on great significance or meaning ... and become part of that lasting legacy of the one we have lost.

If you could say just a few last words as you knew you were dying, to whom would they be addressed and what would they be? I'm guessing that somewhere in those last words would be a heartfelt "I love you," as well as some sincere request such as "take care of your father," or "go on living your life."

Chapters 13-17 of John's gospel are *Jesus'* earthly life last words to his disciples as he prepares them for a major transition. Something new, namely, the ministry of the disciples and the church, is about to be born; and Jesus himself, is about to die.

In that holy ground context, Jesus says, "As the Father has loved me, so I love you, and so you should love one another."

What is it that matters when all else, including life itself, is said and done? What is the most compelling, the most powerful, the most enduring force in all of the cosmos? What, as we prepare both for living **and** dying, becomes the echoing refrain?

Love. Not the "What do I get out of it" kind of love that is often meant when we use the word. Here, Jesus is specifically commending to his followers agape love, the unconditional and self-sacrificing love that he himself exemplifies.

Jesus says, "*abide in my love.*" Stay, remain within it, live in my love. The verb, *meno* in Greek, "abide" in English, has a continuing connotation. This is not a short-lived experience; this is for life. "Abide in my love."

And such a state of being does not happen in isolation, or simply as an act of the will. It is very closely related with a requirement that Jesus makes into a condition for love. "If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love ... And this is my commandment, that you love one another ..."

As he offered last words to his disciples, of all that Jesus might have said, he chooses love and relationship ... and not just a feeling or inclination, this love, but obedience to his commandment to *choose* to love others as God has loved us.

It is interesting to note that Jesus lifts up the image of friendship to describe his relationship with us ... "I do not call you servants any longer ... I have called you friends." Borrowing a phrase from the Quakers we can say that the church is "a society of friends" united by the love Christ has for us. As the choir sang: Amigos de Cristo – we're friends of the Lord.

Typically we think of our friends as being those we *choose* because we like them, or we share something in common with them. But Jesus reminds us that the basis for Christian friendship is much deeper.

In calling us friends, Jesus gives the apostles and all of us a new name, a new identity ... one that has been chosen and given to us. Before we are anything else --- sons, daughters, brothers, sisters, spouses, Liberal, Conservative, employee, employer, retired ... we are friends of Jesus ... those whose lives, by God's grace, are written into the story of Jesus and his church.

American Methodist preacher David Hockett, commenting on this, says that one of the interesting things about life in the church is that as we come more and more to abide in Christ, we also come more and more to share life with others who are friends of Jesus. And, as you know from reading the gospels, "Jesus makes strange friends."

Quoting Hockett, "From a disjointed and unlikely group of tax collectors, fishermen, women, sinners, and religious zealots Jesus forms a society of friends whose life together is rooted in and grows out of their friendship with him. This society of friends is then called to embody the kind of radical, self-

giving love that is seen in the life and death of Jesus. Being friends of Christ means that we are graciously chosen – chosen not because of any inherent quality we may possess and chosen not for reward, but for the responsibility of being obedient to Christ’s commandment of love.”

In the reading today from Acts, we hear of the ongoing ministry of Peter ... a disciple and friend of Jesus – a pillar of the early church. We are told: “While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word. The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on Gentiles...”

There are two words which stick out for me as I read those lines from Acts ... They are: “astonished” and “even.” Gentiles are coming to faith in God in Christ, and the Christians of Jewish descent are “astonished” that the Holy Spirit of God is being given to “even” the Gentiles.

It seems they have no idea what God is doing, what God is capable of, or who God is able to reach. Instead of being open to the infinite possibilities of God, they are closed-minded, thinking that the only way to God is a way that looks like the way in which they came to God.

As if their understanding of God is the only right or possible way.

Of course, this is the struggle that we see over and over again in the New Testament Church - between Jewish and Gentile Christians. The question that hangs in the air is, “Can one follow Jesus without also being Jewish?”

And in many ways, this is also the struggle of the church today. Most of us can’t imagine a church, much different from what we have already. As our members age and pews slowly empty out, we talk about “tweaking this” and “tweaking that.” We’ll add a few guitars to liven up the music and post what we’re doing to Facebook. Because that’ll draw them in. But at the same time, we fuss about rules of order; and we insist on strict standards for belonging, careful about how far we are prepared to go in extending our welcome.

But the story of the early church is one that reads: “New things to be done. New people to be reached with Christ’s love. New ways to live out the reign of God in our world.” And to do that, we need to see past our own limited view of the possibilities, to an understanding expressed in the well-known words of the apostle Paul: “Glory to God, whose power working in us, can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine.”

We need to recapture the ability to be “astonished” when God begins to do something new in our midst, something that has the potential to bring new life into a church that is struggling with tiredness and decline.

And today’s gospel presents us with a recipe for faithfulness which may be the one thing that will save the church from death. We whom Jesus calls ‘friends’ are those who are commanded by Jesus to love. And love is not a choice; it is a way of life for those who are friends of Jesus. It’s been said that Christian friendship is not so much about what we feel toward one another as it is about

our willingness to follow Christ’s example in considering the needs of the other before we consider our own.

When Jesus calls us to be friends – it doesn’t mean we always have to like one another, but we do have to love one another ... including those we would never before have counted among our friends; even some we might consider quite unlovable. The world says, “Keep out those who are different, build fences and secure your borders.” Jesus says, “Welcome and befriend the stranger.” The world says, “Hate your enemies.” Jesus says, “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.” The world says, “Only certain kinds of people are worthy of our friendship. But the good news of our Christian faith is this: “In Christ, there is no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, ... male or female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.”

It is indeed a profound gift we have been given – friendship with Christ. But the gift is also a command ... and our calling becomes one in which we are to befriend any and all who are friendless, who are lost and alone, estranged from God, themselves, or one another. Let me close with a story.

Pastor William Willimon tells of how, on his way out of the church late one afternoon, he was chagrined to see, coming down the walkway, a rather forlorn looking man with a small bag, obviously a wanderer or drifter, looking for a handout.

Theirs was a church that was situated near a busy highway, and so drifters were common -- seeking a tank of gas for their trip, a meal, a gift -- preferably in cash -- for their journey to who knows where. They always had some sad story of woe to tell, but the end was always the same -- can you spare \$25 or \$30 dollars?

Willimon sighed as he watched the man approach. It had been a long day and he had a meeting scheduled for that night and he was anxious to get home.

"What can I do for you?" the pastor asked with some annoyance in his voice.

"I wondered if you might be able to help a fella' on the way South," the drifter said. "I was headed down to...."

Willimon cut him off: "Well, I'm in a bit of a rush. So here is all I have. A five and a ten. That's all I've got."

The man took the money as it was offered, looked at it, and without a word, headed out toward the street.

Then he stopped ... and turned toward the pastor as he locked the church door. "I guess you think I'm supposed to thank you, to be grateful," he said with a surprising tone of defiance.

"Well," Willimon said, "now that you mention it, a little gratitude wouldn't hurt."

"Well, I'm not going to thank you. You want to know why?" he sneered.

"Why?" the pastor asked.

"Because you are a Christian. You don't help me because you want to. You *have to* help me because He [thrusting his finger up into the air] told you to help me!" And then he left.

William Willimon stood there, stunned, angry. The nerve of these people! But on his drive home, it hit him. The drifter was right. For Jesus did say, "Love one another as I have loved you. Not just the people *you* choose, but all who are my friends. And Jesus has some strange friends. Amen.