



FLOSSMOOR COMMUNITY CHURCH

May 15, 2011

“CALLED COMPANIONS”

John 15:9-17

Pastor Fred Lyon

A business firm once offered to donate a conference table to a church I served. I went to their office to look at the table, and then made plans to pick it up later in the week when I could return with the church sexton.

When I first visited the firm, I was wearing a coat and tie. As I said hello to folks at the professional building where the office was located, not everyone enthusiastically returned my greeting—perhaps a quick head nod, momentary eye contact, or a forced smile. But at least I was acknowledged.

But later that week—dressed for manual labor in a T-shirt, jeans, and sneakers to help our sexton—I was invisible to the professionals in that office building. People flat out ignored us, even when we politely greeted them.

Sad as this was, the same sort of thing happened the next week—at the church. We were hosting a conference for neighboring pastors. The sexton could not come to work because of a family emergency. So, I went in early to prepare the tables, chairs, and refreshments. Once again I was wearing a T-shirt, jeans, and sneakers. My coat and tie were in my office to change into later.

I was almost done setting up when pastors attending the conference started to arrive. I greeted them and pointed to the coffee, juice, and bagels waiting for them. In response, I received barely any acknowledgement, and not one thank you

I went to change into my dressier clothes and returned to introduce myself as the host pastor. Suddenly the same folks could not have been nicer to me. You could tell they were embarrassed they had treated me like I was ‘just the help’.

It made me wonder—would these pastors have been embarrassed about treating our sexton like he was ‘just the help’ if he had been there that morning? For that matter, would anyone here this morning relish being treated like you were ‘just the help’? Like you were a servant, even a slave?

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The life of Jesus, the early years of Christianity, and the formation of the New Testament all occurred in a culture dominated by the Roman Empire. At the heart of this was a widespread economic, political, and social arrangement known as patron-client relations. Patron-client relations ran from the lowliest peasant slave all the way up to Caesar. In this system, patrons had the power to provide for their clients’ needs and to protect them from trouble. Clients, in return, rendered patrons loyalty, paid for protection, and served their patrons’ interests. The patron-client system has been described as a matter of power and dependency involving “the reciprocal exchange of goods and services between socially superior ‘patrons’ and their socially inferior ‘clients.’” It was a system designed for mutual benefits that, in the long run, mostly benefited patrons.

Patron-client relations depended heavily on slavery. Most slaves were trapped in brutal forms of menial hard labor. But in some cases, slaves were trusted to exercise management and authority on behalf of their masters. One scholar

notes that in addition to “working in business, farming, and households, slaves could be administrators, physicians, teachers, scholars, and poets, and accumulate wealth.”

The thing about patron-client relations is that you did not have to be a slave to be forced to feel, or to be, servile. There were always more socially inferior clients than socially superior patrons, and patrons themselves often were clients of those who were more powerful still. Consequently, even most free persons in Jesus’ time knew something about having to serve somebody if they were to survive and thrive in a social order that ran full throttle on the quid pro quo reality of giving to get and serving others in order to serve one’s own purposes.

One of the more notable features of how patron-client relations worked in Jesus’ day was the function of banquets. Patrons would host banquets to demonstrate their power and status. They would honor their clients by inviting them to banquets. In return, clients came to these banquets to give homage to their patrons. Accompanying all this was a fair amount of wheeling and dealing where patrons and clients alike focused on advancing their own best interests.

Patrons threw banquets to keep their clients happy enough to remain clients who paid them respect and money. Clients attended banquets to keep their patrons happy enough to remain patrons who protected them. What more often than not dominated the proceedings were patrons doing what it took to keep their clients in their place.

Love and friendship were not unheard of at these banquets. But love and friendship were typically compromised by selfish scheming, as people angled to get what they wanted from others. Here, love and friendship were icing on the cake, not the substance of the cake itself.

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Jesus offers a totally different model for patron-client relations.

The banquet thrown by Jesus serves a full menu of love and friendship. This particular banquet, in today’s reading from John 15:9-17, is Jesus’ Last Supper with his disciples. It is the banquet at which the gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke record Jesus movingly inviting his disciples to remember him simply by breaking bread and sharing wine, the same banquet at which the gospel of John records Jesus washing his disciples’ feet and then reassuring them by discussing how they will be alright and deeply cared for by God after Jesus’ death.

For all the ultimate power of his glory and honor, for all the considerable justification he has to look out for his own self interests as he faces death the next day, Jesus treats the disciples as partners. First he tells them to love one another as he has loved them. Next, he tells them there is no “greater love than this, to lay down your life for your friends.”

But then he tells them something startling: “You are my friends if you do what I command. I do not call you slaves any longer, because the slave 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.” And so, all those who would follow Jesus are called into a whole new relationship with God, one another, and the fullness of humankind—not as slaves, not as servants, not as clients, not even as disciples; but as friends.

We are friends who are called into community—community centered in that life-giving banquet Jesus throws for all people in every place and time. A more literal reading of ‘friends’ in today’s lesson from John is ‘loved ones’ (similar to ‘ami’ in French or ‘amigo’ in Spanish have roots in the Latin ‘amare’, to love). We are called to that life-giving banquet where we are the loved ones of God in Christ—loved ones called by Christ to be friends, friends who treat one another and all humankind as beloved.

Christ calls us to the past banquet of the Last Supper, calls us to the present banquet of our ongoing communion-centered community throughout history, calls us to the future banquet at the end of history when all creation will finally be transformed according to God’s sacred intentions. And since Christ calls us friends, indeed, calls us loved ones at this life-giving banquet, perhaps the best description of who we are meant to be is this—to be called companions.

Companion comes from the Latin roots, com and panis, which literally means ‘with bread’. My favorite translation is ‘bread fellows’. Here, friendship and love are expressed through the sharing of our sustenance. Those who are friends

share their bread...and those who share their bread soon become friends.

Companionship is not love in the abstract. Companionship is love concretely expressed in generous acts of sharing with and caring for others. No games, no power plays, no manipulation for gain—companionship is about love concretely expressed in generous acts of sharing with and caring for everyone whom God loves through Christ, everyone whom Christ already deems beloved before we ever arrive at the table.

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On the way in and out of the professional building to pick up that table, the sexton and I were on the loading dock. All sorts of delivery people and packers bustled around. They looked you in the eye and said hello. You could hear friends shouting out “Yo!” and “Hay-ee!” and “How you doin’?” and, quite frankly, a few things not meant to be repeated in a sermon. Folks were cracking jokes, busting chops, and—just imagine—enjoying each other’s company at work.

I felt sorry for the stiffs upstairs.

Members of the 2011 Confirmation Class, please remember: you’re 15 for a moment; but you are a child of God forever. And in every moment of your life---whether at 22, or 33, or 67, or 99---in every moment of your life, you are called companions by Christ.

Remember, too, that it is not our accomplishments that matter, but rather what Christ accomplishes in, through, and with us—how God takes our lives together in order to bear fruit according to God’s loving purposes. Never underestimate the value of how Christ considers you his friend—of how Christ draws us together as friends—to bring faith, hope, and love to a weary world where too many people feel, and actually are, orphaned and friendless.

Once you realize this, and accept this as your calling to the life-giving banquet of Christ’s love, you can never settle for being a stiff who is too important, too powerful, or too superior to be companions in Christ with all God’s children, no matter where in the building they work. Because if Christ were to stand on his importance, to lord the full force of his power and superiority over us, then we all would be in sorry shape, no matter how accomplished we think we are.

There is nothing wrong with being ‘just the help’. Indeed, people who are ‘just the help’ often possess a fair amount of wisdom about knowing just what help they need from the love of a generous and gracious God. If our companionship—our capacity for friendship and love—does nothing to advance generosity and graciousness toward all God’s children whom Christ already calls companion, then we may just need more help than we realize.