

**EASTER 6B (May 6<sup>th</sup> 2018)**  
***No Longer Servants, but Friends***  
**(John 15:9-17)**

One of the first things I do when I get into the office each day is check my e-mail. And, not long ago, I received the following notification: “Edward, someone is looking for you.” Now, it wasn’t the first time that I had received such a message. That’s because it came from a website I had signed up for years ago when I was curious about what some of my old high school classmates were up to. And now that I’m registered, of course, I get an e-mail every time someone goes to this website to check out *my* profile.

The problem, however, is that I’m too cheap to sign up for anything more than the basic, “free” membership which means that I can never find out exactly *who* was looking for me, or read any message they may have sent. To *do* this, of course, I would have to upgrade my membership and pay the extra \$2.50 a month – for a three months subscription that is. If you sign up for a year, it works out to \$2.00 a month. Two years, and the monthly fee is only \$1.50. And again, as I say, I won’t sign up for any of these deals. I *told* you I was cheap!

And, yet, despite this fact, whenever I see the words, “Edward, someone is looking for you,” I nevertheless still get excited and immediately open up the link to this website even though I know *full well* that I won’t be able to tell who it is. All I’m allowed to see is a brief description of the person, such as “A 52 year old man – or 57 or 61; it is always consistent with how old *I am* at that point – “in Anaheim, California has sent you a message.”

In fact, come to think of it, for a number of years running, that was the *only* description that ever came up when I opened the link to this website. And I can’t tell whether this is just an *old* message that’s been sitting out there in cyber-space for all that time because

I'm too cheap to pay \$2.50 to see who it's from – and they just keep sending it to me (although apparently updating the age to correspond with mine) until I *do* finally come up with the cash. *Or...* whether it's simply the latest in a *series* of messages, dating back a number of years, in which case I think I may have a *stalker!*

Even worse, is the sobering realization that only *one* person, presumably one old friend – in all that time – has ever bothered to go looking for me. At least, only one person has tried contacting me.

Actually, there may have been others because whenever I've looked at someone *else's* profile I've noticed that there's a little box that reads "Edward Kropa was here" and I always make sure to click out of it so the person doesn't know I've been checking up on them. So perhaps that's what others have *also* done when they've looked at my profile. Or maybe not... In which case it's kind of depressing to think that there aren't any of my old friends out there looking for *me*.

Nevertheless, my point is that the Internet has certainly changed how we think about, and then maintain our relationships today, hasn't it? In the past, for instance, a friend was simply someone who you were in frequent contact with; either personally, or by mail, or then by telephone. But *now*, of course, with the advent of personal computers and the Internet, not to mention cell phones and tablets, we can also stay in touch with our friends through e-mails, instant-messaging, or sites like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, or the kind I was just describing for you. *Or* we can even have "virtual" relationships with people we've never *met* before as well.

I guess what I'm saying here is that computer technology has completely revolutionized and transformed (just as it has in many other areas of our lives as well) what we actually *mean* by

friendship. For instance, on some of these sites, apparently, you actually have to *request* to be that person's friend. And then there's also the capability of keeping track – numerically – of *how many* friends you actually have...

Well, in today's Gospel reading, as we heard, Jesus *himself* had something to say about friends and friendship. In three consecutive verses of our passage (verses 13, 14, and 15), Jesus uses the word "friends" three separate times.

"*You* are my friends," he says in verse 14. But what does he *mean* here? What *is* a friend? And what *kind* of friend is he talking about?

A small boy once described a friend as "Someone who knows all about you... and likes you just the same. The poet Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote, "the glory of friendship is not in the outstretched hand, not the kindly smile, nor the joy of companionship; it is in spiritual inspiration that comes to one when he discovers that someone *else* believes in him and is willing to trust him."

Finally, a British publication once offered a prize for the best definition of a friend. Out of the literally thousands of answers that were received, the winning definition was: "A friend is the one who comes *in* when the whole world has gone *out*."

And all of these are appropriate definitions; appropriate, I would argue, in the sense of describing how Jesus is a friend to *us*... but not necessarily how we are a friend to *him*. After all, it can be said that Jesus knows all about us, and still likes us just the same. And Jesus is our friend because we soon discover that he believes in us and trusts us. And, finally, Jesus – it is certainly true – is the kind of friend who stands beside us even when everyone else in the world deserts us. But are these also the ways that we would describe how *we* are friends to *him*? I don't think so.

Actually, as it turns out, Jesus has a very *specific* kind of friendship in mind here – especially as it relates and applies to us. And to try and begin to understand exactly what he means here, let me tell you a story.

Some years ago, there were these two men, named Wayne and Glenn, who became acquainted on a college campus in the Midwest. Glenn was just a student at the time, and Wayne one of his teachers. After college, Glenn went on to graduate school and, coincidentally, there he was reunited with and even worked *under* his former teacher, Wayne, who had also moved on to another institution of higher learning.

After earning his masters, however, Glenn then embarked on his own career. But six years later he came back to that same school and, once again, worked as an assistant to Wayne. And it was during this formative period, in fact, that Wayne – it could be said – became something of a mentor to Glenn, as well as his teacher. He taught Glenn everything he knew, passing along a body of knowledge in their shared field of endeavor. In other words, Glenn learned from and in many ways also modeled himself *after* Wayne.

At times, however, it was a rocky relationship; mainly because Wayne was a crusty old coot, and Glenn was pretty feisty himself. But, through it all, there was a growing bond between the two men – even though they didn't always show it publicly.

Five years later, Glenn once again struck out on his own. Even more than that, the former student had now become a full-fledged teacher himself. And then six years after that, Glenn took a position at a nearby university, doing exactly the same kind of work that his former teacher Wayne was doing.

And they were both very good at it. So good, in fact, that they became rivals. It was a contest to see who was better; the former

teacher or the former student. Even so, there was also this undeniable sense of mutual respect behind and underneath that rivalry.

After ten more years, Wayne finally retired. And in the subsequent years that followed, the relationship between this former teacher and his former student continued to evolve. Soon it was something much more than teacher-student, more than a professional association, even more than a competitive rivalry – it was now finally clear to everyone that what these two men had was a *friendship*; a deeper friendship than most outside observers would have ever thought possible.

It was a friendship, and a bond, you see, that gradually developed and evolved over time. They didn't start out as friends; they started out as teacher and student. But that's how they ended up. At some point the student, having learned at the feet of the master (so to speak) had become a master himself – and it was this mastery of their shared profession that ultimately resulted in their becoming friends. Wayne taught Glenn everything he knew, and Glenn then used that knowledge to good effect, sometimes even surpassing his former teacher...

Well, if you haven't guessed it by now – especially those of you who are college football fans – the story I just told you is the story of Wayne Woodrow “Woody” Hayes, and Glenn Edward “Bo” Schembechler. Football coaches extraordinaire at Ohio State and Michigan respectively; intense, sometimes bitter, rivals; but in the end, when all was said and done... *friends*.

So much so that, a dozen years ago this coming fall, just before the annual Ohio State-Michigan football game, Bo Schembechler told some documentary filmmakers the story of the time when he was going to receive an honor and an ailing Woody Hayes *insisted* – despite his poor health – on traveling several hours to be present,

and also to speak, at some length in fact, at the awards banquet. The next day Woody Hayes died. And, fittingly, after honoring Woody's memory in this way, by telling that story, Bo himself died the very next morning, on the eve of the big game.

Now why do I tell this story? It's because of something Jesus said in this morning's gospel; the *key*, I believe, to understanding what Jesus meant when he told his disciples that they were now his friends. "I do not call you *servants* any longer," said Jesus, "because the servant doesn't 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."

Think about it, Jesus and the disciples started out as teacher and students, didn't they? Just like Woody and Bo. And for approximately three years, then, the disciples traveled with Jesus and learned from him; literally learning at the feet of the master; gleaning and internalizing everything – all the teachings – that Jesus was trying to pass along to them.

And now in John 15, in Jesus' farewell address, given on the eve of his arrest and crucifixion, the teacher is now telling his former students that they are servants and students no longer. They are now his friends. Why? Because he has taught them, and they have learned everything that Jesus intended to pass along from the Father.

In other words, this friendship – at least on the part of the disciples – is not primarily about feelings or attitudes; it's about receiving a message and a body of knowledge. And once the servants, or the students, have acquired this knowledge and internalized this message, they are *no longer* servants and students – they are now Jesus' friends; a very particular, specific kind of friend. They are friends just as Woody and Bo became friends; drawn together and forever linked by their common calling and mission. For Woody

and Bo it was all about football – Big Ten football. Not all that significant in the grand scheme of things, I admit.

But for the disciples the dynamic is, nevertheless, very much the same. Only the cause and the stakes are so much higher. The calling and the mission is not just about football, but rather God’s redemptive plan for the entire world! In Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself, wrote St. Paul in 2 Corinthians. And now, says Paul, God has given *us* this ministry of reconciliation. That is, those who have learned at the feet of Jesus are now called to teach *others* themselves.

Woody taught Bo, and then Bo went out and used that knowledge, sometimes even getting the best of his former teacher. Likewise, in John 14, Jesus even said to his disciples, “Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do *greater* works than these...” Even for Jesus, therefore, the ultimate teacher and master, his former servants – now his friends – will apparently do even greater things in his name.

But this is not uncommon. We’ve all probably heard of the ancient Greek philosophers: Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. But what you might not know, or may have forgotten – as I did – is that Plato was the *student* of Socrates, and then Aristotle, in turn, was the *student* of Plato. In other words, the great tradition of Western philosophical thought ran directly from teacher to student; from Socrates to Plato to Aristotle, and then on to all those others who continued to pass it along to each subsequent generation.

Or going back to football for a moment... In coaching they talk about coaching “trees.” In other words, you can actually diagram, just like a *family* tree, a progression of coaching relationships that all go back to a single coach who taught and trained an entire

generation of coaches who then followed him and, in many cases, even surpassed him, in terms of wins and losses, but even went out and also did the very same thing themselves in terms of teaching and preparing the *next* generation of coaches as well. And so on and so forth. The architect of the great San Francisco 49ers dynasty of the 1980's, Bill Walsh, for example, created a coaching tree which contains no less than 29 additional NFL head coaches who either worked directly for Walsh himself, or under one of Walsh's assistants.

Again, what does this have to do with Jesus and the disciples? To answer that question all we have to do is go back to Jesus' image of the vine and the branches from last week's gospel, a metaphor that continues in today's passage as well. "I am the vine, and you are the branches," said Jesus. For what purpose? So that "those who abide in me, and I in them, (will) bear much fruit."

In other words, Jesus is the ultimate teacher, the consummate teacher and mentor. But the reason is so that his followers, his disciples, his friends, can now go out into the world and do *what*? Bear fruit! Jesus has made known everything he heard from his Father for that specific purpose. "You did not choose me," he said, "but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last."

He also said, "You are my friends if you do what I command you." Was it mere *obedience* that he was after when he said this? No, of course not. What Jesus intended was to train, mobilize, and inspire, an entire generation, an entire *body* of believers who would then go out into the world to bear fruit, and thereby *transform* that world through the power of God's love, and grace, and forgiveness...



That's what it's all about: learning at the feet of the master and then going forth, like a vine – or even like a coaching tree, if you will – to reproduce and spread God's redeeming message to all the world.

“No one has greater love than this,” said Jesus, “to lay down one's life for one's friends.” Not only is this what Jesus *did*, it's also what Jesus *taught*, isn't it? In other words, that those who would follow him would not only “talk the talk” but also “walk the walk.” To be willing, just as their master was, to lay down their lives for others.

In two weeks, it will be Confirmation Sunday here at Hope as we go back to celebrating confirmation on Pentecost; the day when the church was born. And simply put, Confirmation is a yearly reminder of our Christian calling and mission. It's not about stuffing teenagers' heads with a bunch of biblical and theological knowledge, or forcing them to compile so many service hours, but rather teaching and training the next generation of Christians who, in turn, will one day be called upon to inspire and prepare those who come after *them*!

Just like a huge vine, creeping down through the centuries; or a coaching tree descending from the greatest coach of them all; the Christian church is not simply a collection of servants or followers – it is the calling and gathering of an entire body of apostles and evangelists – *friends* – whose entire purpose, indeed whose only reason for existence, is to share the good news of Jesus Christ with a hurting and troubled world...

Quite often, as I say, when I check my e-mail, I discover a message from an apparently long-lost friend that reads, “Edward, someone is looking for you.” It occurs to me, this morning, that at least

part of what we experience and encounter whenever we come to worship is a similar message, “Edward, someone is looking for you.”

That someone is an old friend; someone who tells me that I am his friend because he has made known to me everything from his Father; someone who reminds me – over and over again – that in my baptism I was called and appointed to go and bear fruit in his name. That someone is Jesus. And today he’s calling you too.

Amen.