

The 6th Sunday of Easter, 2015. St. Augustine's in-the-Woods Freeland WA. John 15:9-17
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Mark - the earliest of the gospels - presents a uniformly bad picture from the beginning of the journey to Jerusalem from the Mount of Transfiguration of the 12 men who had followed Jesus faithfully for three years.

Every opportunity they were given to make a good decision they blew it. And it's an escalating pattern - Judas' failure is simply the most egregious example of that pattern.

And it happens all the way to the empty tomb.

Yet here in today's gospel is a remarkable thing - in spite of the failure, the betrayal, the depressing inadequacies of these male disciples Jesus - in his final discourse - tells them two things:

- Firstly, "you are my friends - you are still my friends, in spite of all that you have done or failed to do; in spite of all that you will do or will fail to do;" and
- Secondly, "I still love you; I will always love you."

That's really "Motherly Jesus," isn't it?! So remarkable was this moment that the Christian community retained the story of these seminal words of Jesus to his disciples, and transmitted them all the way to John - the latest of the four gospels, written perhaps 60 years later, who captured wonderfully well the reality behind Jesus' words. His message to his male followers was this:

- Firstly, it's not the destination that's central for you now, but about the lessons learned on the way.
- Secondly, it's not what you believe about a person but what lies in your heart, what informs your actions toward them - your relationship with them and to them;
- Thirdly, failure often appears to be an enduring marker of religious communities, but that's to miss the point - human relationships are always a struggle - growth in relationship, which involves both success and failure, is the most important part of the trip. I recall one of my Pastoral Leadership program professors describing how, when she and others began a new leadership program at the Harvard Business School saying to her first class, "Can any of you give me an example of a time when you failed at something?" No one offered. The next year she prefaced that question with "Here at the Harvard Business School we believe that failure is such a great teacher that you cannot be a leader unless you've had experiences of failure." When she asked the students for their own examples of failure every hand went up. And,
- Lastly, true faithfulness is found in the continuing struggle to stay in relationship.

We will inevitably come to places of disagreement with those we love. Honoring the person, even in disagreement, is the marker of true relationship. That's what Jesus meant by "abiding in my love" - a friendship that is embracing of difference, a compassion that is thoughtless of self, a joy that is effervescent, and disarming and real. These are the markers of true, authentic

community.

We live in difficult times than those of the first Century. The world changes with such rapidity, and we humans are struggling to keep up, unable to incorporate the changes that our speeding world throws at us; we struggle to understand each other, and we fear that what lies ahead is not as attractive or as safe as what has gone before.

How easy to retreat into the known! To take the safe path. Can't you hear the disciples – perhaps especially Judas – saying to Jesus: “Why not go back to Galilee before the Passover? We can come back later, after the crowds and the Romans have left; you can have your public protest then, Jesus, when it won't get us all killed!”

In the face of change there seems to be a timeless response, doesn't there?! In the case of the disciples it represents a complete failure to understand what Jesus was about, what he hoped for, what he intended to do. And Jesus knew it, he knew that these men were working against his intentions. His own disciples! It's hard to love people who work against your dreams, isn't it?!

Yet to Jesus they remained utterly and immovably loveable.

That's a mark – perhaps *The Mark* – of God's creation, that we all remain loveable, in spite of our own flaws, our own struggles with one another and our own demons. “You are still my friends” says Jesus down the ages to us, “abide in my love”. All of you. With each other. Together.

What would our world be like if we could disagree yet still remain in relationship? A very different place! But that isn't the way of the world, at least not today's world. Where is there an example for our world of that sort of behavior, I wonder?

After what I've just said, that should be understood as a rhetorical question! As followers of Jesus that example should be us! Conflict in Christian communities is not uncommon. In fact, such conflict – unresolved – is the biggest ‘turn-off’ for people looking for spiritual community, looking for a different way.

But hear this too: there is no such thing as an authentic community without also a degree of conflict. What I've said today is exactly that – that there is a conflict between the male disciples' view of what Jesus should be doing and not doing, and Jesus' view of what he should be doing and not doing. One disciple – Judas – appears to have escalated that conflict to dramatic levels – and while the world has, ever since, condemned him for it, his behavior is not unique to this founding Christian community – many of us have seen betrayals of this sort within our own faith communities.

No, conflict will always be present in some way. Authentic communities recognize this truth and respond in the way that Jesus responded toward his own disciples: to see those who stand in opposition as – always – utterly and immovably loveable.

And let's not forget that we also fail and fall short. So our calling is not only to orient ourselves toward others in love & generosity but also to be open to recognizing those occasions when others express their love and generosity toward us when we fail. It's only in a community where we're all able to recognize both our own failings and to extend the hand of fellowship and love to others that we'll all truly discover what authentic community is all about.

So let us remember that while there is much that we struggle about, day in and day out; while there are many disagreements in our lives with others, the greatest commandment - of which Jesus' other sacrament-making commandments are entirely derivative - is this: Love one another as I continue to love you. Amen.

