Title: I have called you friends
John 15:9-17
Rev. Sharon Smith

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15:9 As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love.
15:10 If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love.
15:11 I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.
15:12 "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.
15:13 No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends.
15:14 **You are my friends** if you do what I command you.
15:15 I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant 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.
15:16 You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name.
15:17 I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.

A good friend of mine who I met in my first years of being in Canada through our mutual love for the African continent, went to live and work in Uganda for 5 years.
She met and fell in love with a Ugandan doctor and they moved to Canada to start their life together. This tall, confident, fun loving African man arrived in British Columbia and for the first 3 years he walked around disoriented, depressed, in culture shock – swimming in the death of a dream.

I remember asking him in those years about his experience.
And his words have stayed with me: “everyone is so friendly, but friends are hard to find”.

I am still working out what these words mean.

And perhaps we can shed some light on them today
as we reflect on some experiences of friendship on the words of Jesus:

“I do not call you servants, I have called you friends”

The Johannine community (who gathered around the apostle John), collected and remembered the words of Jesus,
and from these words created a cosmic spirituality – with a long view of time – and an ethic of love.

In this particular chapter, Jesus is saying goodbye to his friends.
The scene is set at the last supper - This is Maundy Thursday.

The mood is one of melancholy – there is a pervasive sadness, anticipating grief.
And Jesus is providing reassurance and a culture of relationship for his friends.

There is no room for wearing out friendship. The friendship is Jesus' choosing, so we are not the ones in control of what shape this friendship may take.
"I chose you" is not some systematic theological statement or doctrine.
It is a heartfelt reminder to a group of friends who are about to suffer much loss.

New Testament scholar Karoline Lewis's paraphrases this passage in these words:
"You are here. With me. Now is not the time to wonder whether or not you should be here, are meant to be here, are worthy to be here… you are my friends. [Out of all the people around me, you are my friends]."

Usually in that era, "students wishing to learn the Torah sought out a rabbi whose teachings they wanted to emulate. The choice was theirs. But Jesus reverses the order."
(Charles Cousar, Texts for Preaching, Year B, p. 325).

Jesus flattens the pyramid:
- where a teacher was one in authority and more elite than their students
- Or like a master to a servant.

Relationships were set up as a hierarchy (even in the family system),
- Where there was one-way giving and receiving,
- one person doing all the talking, and the others listening,
- like a charity model – where only the elite, educated ones have something to offer.

Instead, Jesus offered friendship:
- mutuality, intimacy
- positive regard,
- reciprocity, humility

It certainly complicates things – and yet is closer to lived experience.
- Does a boss learn from their employee?
- a student teach a professor?
- a child offer wisdom to a parent?

I remember a moment when this ethic of friendship was subversive.
I was teaching at UBC in the Department of Occupational Therapy and I was working part time on the Downtown Eastside for an organization called Jacob's Well – a place of friendship and intentional reversal of power.

On that Monday, I went to visit a Jacob's Well friend, let's call him Joe, at St Paul's hospital. He had been admitted to the psychiatric ward.
I walked in and I was greeted by two Occupational Therapy students who were in my class.
I looked over at Joe – sitting in the corner of the ward, rolling up tobacco between sheets of newspaper, rocking back and forth in his chair.
With all the courage I could muster, I said: "I have come to visit my friend Joe"
The students' faces were noticeably puzzled. I swallowed my pride and walked over to see him.

"I have called you friends" – is a subversive act.

The theme of friendship was most fully developed in Greco Roman writings and Jewish texts
Friendship was a favorite topic among the philosophers.
The 5th century B.C.E. philosopher Pythagorus famously said, "Friends have all things in common".
Pythagoras founded a community that emphasized friendship, the epitome of all virtues.
Friendship, he believed, called for the obliteration of estrangement and an ethic of non-retaliation. Competition and rivalry have no place in friendship. Trust is essential. Falsehood is not to be born. Much of this Pythagorean thought was adopted by the early Christian communities as well.

Melvyn R. Hillmer (1987), "They Believed in Him: Discipleship in the Johannine Tradition," in Patterns of Discipleship in the N.T. ed by Richard N. Longenecker.

The very first day of graduate school in Vancouver. I met a woman who was at the same age and stage of life as I was and we seemed to 'click'. We were both new to Vancouver and we began to share information about what we had found out while living here all of 6 days.
The conversation was easy, light and I thought to myself 'this has potential'.

Her and I decided to walk together once a week.
During the first few walks I switched into my usual role of asking questions (something I learned from my therapy training, and church life as a pastor's kid). This was very comfortable for me. I could get away with sharing very little and probe and problematize all her issues in life – while I got a way with hiding under a veil of mysterious perfection.

My she would not take this. She soon cottoned onto my façade and I can still remember the day she said to me: "Sharon, I feel like all I do when I am with you is talk. I am done talking. I know nothing about you."
I found myself fumbling for words – I had never been given the opportunity to open up to another in quite this way.
None of my rehearsed stories would cut it. I had to really think and be honest. This was a painful time for me. I felt like my masks were being destroyed.

There were many times that I wanted to give up on this friendship. I was so good at superficial friendships. I thought that I did not need her. But I did.

I received from her – the gift of reciprocity.

See Civic Friendship by Dr. Anne Marie Ellithorpe

Aristotle identified that friendships are absolutely necessary for a good life and that they both orient us toward and form us in goodness and truth as we acquire and grow in the virtues through them.

See Friendship by Dr. Paul Wadell.

"Friendship is both a gift and a calling"

And so I invite you also into an exploration of the complexities friendship…

Perhaps there are some conversations that you might like to have with a friend.
It might go like this….

- We've been friends for ___ years…do you remember the first time we met?
- What is your favorite memory of our friendship?
- How do you think our relationship has changed over time?
- What about our friendship would you hope others would experience in their own friendships?
- Do you think faith informs our experience of friendship (or that our friendship informs our experience of faith)?
- If this was to be our very last conversation, is there anything you'd want to say to me?

And then turn the table. Allow your friend to ask you the same.

On that night that Jesus was betrayed, he said to his disciples:
"I have called you friends"
Amen