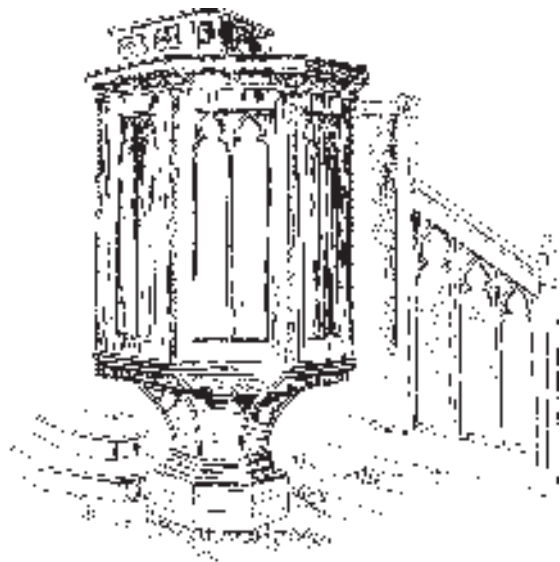


May 16, 2010

# Westminster Presbyterian Church

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## Sermons

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**But I Have Called You Friends**  
by the Reverend Laurie Brubaker Davis

Acts 10:34-36, 44-48  
John 15:12-17

Do you remember the 8<sup>th</sup> grade? It's a year most of us would rather skip, if we could. For me, it was the year my family moved from Englewood, New Jersey to Wichita, Kansas. By the end of my 8<sup>th</sup> grade school year, I got up the nerve to try out for the 9<sup>th</sup> grade cheerleading squad. This was a big deal to me. My mother was a cheerleader in New Rochelle, New York in the 1930s. Both of my older sisters had been cheerleaders in Englewood in the 1960s. And now in 1970 it was my turn to carry on the family tradition. I also hoped that becoming a cheerleader would significantly improve my position in the rigid hierarchy of junior high popularity.

These tryouts involved two rounds on the wooden stage in our stifling auditorium one day in late May. So when they called my name, with my heart pounding and neck sweating, I got on stage and did my little routine—no better and no worse than I usually performed it. On to the next round—I was pretty sure I had it sewn up, at least through to the finals.

My last name, growing up, was "Brubaker" which always came right after "Brown" in alphabetical listings of names. So when I heard the names called of the girls chosen to advance to the second round, I was stunned because the names announced went right from "Allen" to "Brown" to "Enoch."

What? They didn't say "Brubaker"? Just like that I got skipped over—voted off the island? Of course the beautiful, popular, harp-playing Dawn Enoch was chosen—but not the red-haired (often braided) nerdy, cello-playing preacher's kid, Laurie Brubaker. No, I had been cut in the first round. I would never be a cheerleader like my sisters or my mother. I was not chosen. I was rejected—another in a series of 8<sup>th</sup> grade miseries. Thank God I survived the 8<sup>th</sup> grade.

Don't we all hate to be rejected—by anyone, from anything, at any age? This aversion to rejection probably reaches its peak during our teenage years—when some mornings we wake up and dread going to school, since nobody really likes us anyway. As a buffer against this terrifying possibility, I learned from my daughters, when you start to like someone, you can't just go up to that person and say, "I like you. Let's go out." Instead, you get a trusted friend to be your "go-between." You get someone to deliver this message to the person you like. Your friend will ask for you, to see if by some fluke or miracle, they actually might like you back. And what if they don't? Well, at least you saved yourself the crushing blow of a direct head-on rejection.

Maybe we didn't quite hear what Jesus said without a go-between to buffer the pain of his rejection. These words Jesus spoke to his disciples just before they would betray and abandon him: "You did not choose me, but I chose you." This is a core message from Jesus, not only to his disciples just hours before he would literally lay down his life for them, but also to all of us, gathered here today. Jesus is saying, "Yes, I like you. You're in. I have already chosen you to be my friend. If Jesus had a Facebook page, he would be the one to ask you to "friend" him.

How will you respond? Will you click "confirm request"? Perhaps we should consider what kind of a friendship we're saying "yes" to. What *kind* of a friend do we have in Jesus? Marlene Dietrich once said, about friends, "It's the ones you can call up at 4:00 a.m. that matter." Jesus is that kind of a friend. As my colleague, Wayne McLaughlin, put it in a sermon he published:

*We can call God anytime of day or night, as often as we need to—and know that God will listen, because God cares about us—which doesn't mean that God will give us anything we want. No. Friends do not give the car keys to you if you're drunk. Because God is our friend—we can relax in God's presence. We can be ourselves. We can be who we're meant to be. (Three Pigs of Jesus, pp.126-127.)*

Before you click that "confirm" button, there is another aspect of "friending" Jesus we need to consider. On the one hand, we can be sure that Jesus will always listen, and never forsake, abandon, or give up on us, no matter how badly we behave. But on the other hand, you are saying "yes" to a friendship with God Almighty, Creator of the Universe.

If you are having trouble getting your mind around this concept of being somehow buddy-buddy with the Cosmic Christ, the Alpha and the Omega, that's good. That means you are starting to get the power and mystery at the heart of John's Gospel. In practically every sentence of this metaphor rich text—the more you look, the more you see. Paradoxes at every turn: Jesus, as God and human—Jesus here in the flesh and here from the beginning of Creation, all at the same time. Now Jesus, God of God, our Lord and Master, is calling us "friend"? How can that be?

Let's consider more closely just one of these seemingly contradictory metaphors, verse 16: "And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, *fruit that will last*." What is one thing we know about fruit? Other than how wonderfully delicious a perfectly ripe strawberry or peach may be, fruit *doesn't* last. Even fruit that is artificially boosted with chemicals eventually goes bad—really bad. Think about those couple of strawberries that you forgot about at the back of your refrigerator. Or how about those bananas that went from green to yellow to spotted to dark brown? So what is Jesus talking about here? How can we let this phrase ripen our understanding of Jesus' command to "love one another as I have loved you"? I hear "fruit that will last" as a catch phrase that signals "watch out!" Yes, if we let Jesus be our friend, Jesus has our back; but, Jesus is *also* going to mess with our minds—stretching us to think in new ways and to do things we would never have dreamed of doing—not in a million years. But then along comes this Jesus into our lives.

Our first scripture lesson, in Acts 10, can serve as a cautionary tale about what can happen, what *will* happen if you become a more intentional friend of Jesus—if you say, "Yes, I want to be the best friend I can be to you, Jesus." At the beginning of Acts 10, Peter is pretty sure he knows the score. He is a Jew who has confessed Jesus as the Messiah and his Lord. However, Peter does not mix with Gentiles. That practice is central to his practice of the faith. Peter contradicts even God in order to follow the rules he has been taught when he refuses to eat, "By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is profane or unclean." Unclean Gentiles are not on his radar or a part of his mission.

*But then something happens.* Along comes Cornelius, drawn in a mystical way, to seek friendship, preaching and baptism from Peter. And by the end of this chapter, not only has Cornelius' conversion been completed and sealed in baptism—but we see Peter also being converted in this experience with Cornelius. This person-to-person encounter must have blown Peter away. The "us and them" that had framed his understanding, had been shattered. Can you imagine how disorienting that must have been for Peter? By the end of this chapter, we are told that Peter will now not only *eat* with these Gentiles—but *be a guest* in their homes for several days.

Do we really want to "friend" Jesus? Whom might we end up eating with? Whom might Jesus call us to invite into our church, our lives? "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you." There's a lot of sacrificing that comes with this kind of love, short of sacrificing our lives. Peter had to lay down his aversion, his repulsion, towards Gentiles. What about us? What fear or prejudice is Jesus calling us to lay down? We all have them. People and groups of people we love to hate—people different from us—people who are "not us." Maybe because their age, race, sexual orientation, education, or politics makes them seem different, just "not us." You know—people we'd rather not even be anywhere near. And yet those are the very people God is calling us to love—not only for their sake, but for ours as well. *Those people* are the very people who will help us grow deeper in our friendship with Christ.

Did you see how that worked with Peter and Cornelius? It took Cornelius, the outsider, to open Peter's eyes to the reality, the on-the-ground application, of Jesus' parting-word commandment to, "Love one another, as I have loved you." How about you and me? What person or group of people has God been challenging *you* to open your heart to? What are you being called to lay down today that may be keeping you from loving others the way Jesus loves you?

The more you look, the tougher this love commandment becomes. Most of us would rather follow a set of rules and know we were done with it. But this love commandment pushes us to lay down even our love of rules, if they contradict our friendship with Jesus. That was the struggle for Peter, and is the struggle for many of us—especially we Presbyterians, who do love our rules.

Over and over again in the Gospel of John, we read about the relationship with Christ, the Living Water; Christ, the Bread of Life. That is where it begins and never ends. Did you ever notice how there is no listing or partial listing of the Ten Commandments in John? It's about the living out of the one commandment, the "new commandment" Jesus says again and again—twice in today's lesson.

Are we ready to say yes? Are we ready to click "confirm"? I know many of us have said "yes" to Christ's invitation years ago. Some of us may be just ready to say "yes" for the first time, or to take our "yes" to a new, more intentional level. Right here, in worship and in our faith community is where we can grow most readily into this relationship.

I was thrilled to see us living into this promise on Friday night here at Urban Nights. We had over 25 volunteers; not only did they show up to put in their two hour shift, they did so much more. I saw them truly engage with over 125 strangers—visitors who God brought through our doors. And God was saying, "yes" that's the kind of love I'm talking about.

When strangers (whether Presbyterian, Catholic, or anyone else) gather together at a Habitat for Humanity build site to work together alongside the new first-time home owner to build that home, God is saying, "yes" that's the kind of love I'm talking about.

When you serve as a greeter or an usher, and welcome all who enter for worship on a Sunday morning, God is also saying, "yes" that's what I'm talking about.

When our Session receives 16 new members into Westminster on Tuesday night, 16 new people who will help to shape us, to change us, to challenge us in new ways, God will be saying "yes" that is the kind of love I'm talking about.

Here's the great news I hope we all take away with us today: Jesus is telling us you don't have to be like a sweaty 8<sup>th</sup> grader desperately trying to make the cheerleading squad to make it into the world of my grace, or to make it in this world at all. You are already in. You have been chosen. You are ready to be deployed. I am your friend and your commander in a chain of command with one link, and one command.

God has put all of us here to be the "go-betweens" because, like the Genesis Choir sang so sweetly, this is a secret that has to get out, to be lived and practiced—this earth changing truth: God loves me. And God also loves you. God does not play favorites, and so neither should we. This truth is one we have to practice over and over again. This is the secret that has to get out. And tag, you're it!