

Title: On Inheriting Friends  
Text: John 15:9-17  
Date: May 6, 2018

Before I ever met you – the fine folk of Shepherdstown Presbyterian – I read about you. In your Ministry Information Form it specifies that you are **“a house of prayer and a school of love.”** This thought struck me, along with many other carefully worded phrases in that form. Can we agree that this sounds beautiful?

Now that I have been here for a while, I have to confess that I have reflected on this on numerous occasions. What does it mean for you to be a house of prayer? What does it mean for you to be a school of love? These are phrases that are affirmed almost every week here. Perhaps some other week I can reflect on what it might mean to be “a house of prayer.” However, with our lectionary passage from John this morning, and with this being a communion Sunday, I thought it might be an opportune time to allow me some free association. I don’t know what “the right answer” is, but these are some thoughts that come to my mind with regards to what it might mean to be “a school of love.”

How can we get “schooled” in love? How do we learn to do unto others, as we would have them do unto us? How do we learn to turn the other cheek? Jesus makes it sound so easy when he says, **“This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.”** (John 15:12) Is it really that simple? Some of my thoughts might surprise you.

I have no experience in writing educational curriculums, but if I were given such an assignment, in this school of love I would teach **mindfulness**. Rather than a scattered brain, or a monkey-brain leaping from one thing to another, I would teach the art of developing stillness and focus.

Jon Kabat-Zinn teaches that **“Mindfulness is the awareness that arises by paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally.”** Rather than us being the star of the show, we are but one actor. Rather than getting caught up in the emotional storm, I would teach the art of being calmly observant.

In this school of love I would train people to be aware of the alarm bell of **reactivity**. When you have an instant, powerful reaction of being right, and the other person being wrong, you are operating from a place of reactivity. When you are conscious of being in the center of the stage, and others are evaluating your response, you are operating from a place of reactivity. When your face gets instantly flush, you are operating from a place of reactivity. Rather than being fully present, when you are operating from reactivity you can never truly love the other person.

In this school of love I would try to train people to **develop a consciousness of the unity of all things**, of how all things are inter-connected. This is especially important – and challenging – when it comes to loving the enemy. No matter how awful we may judge the enemy to be, can we perceive the way in which we are cut from the same cloth?

In this school of love, how I would long for you to be able to **distinguish between the “True Self,” and “the false self.”** We’ve talked about this a lot. When you are operating from “the false self” you are anxious, and achievement-oriented. When you are operating from “the True Self,” you are aware that you are God’s beloved. And when you are truly aware that you are God’s beloved, you likewise become aware that all those whom you come in contact with are God’s beloved as well. Even while aware of the foibles and frailties of the other, you have an overriding sense of love for the other.

Indeed, a fairly foundational element in this school of love would be **learning to know yourself** . . . as a step towards learning to love yourself. How can we love another *as our self* if we don't even love our self? I know that all this sounds a bit abstract, and so we need to integrate this into real life. We can't truly learn how to love in a vacuum. We learn in relationship to others.

So you want to learn to be more loving to that person who irritates you? In this school of love I would invite you to reflect on the words of Carl Jung who writes, "**Everything that irritates us about others can lead us to an understanding of ourselves.**" Jung actually writes about this a fair bit, but rather than taking the time to expound on this now, I am just going to let you think about that. I think there is such a kernel of truth there that makes instinctive sense, that you can just sit with that for a while. Can you reflect on what it is that just sets you off in the other? To the extent that you are able to figure that out, therein lies the invitation to accept and love the other. Take the time to reflect on this.

In our text, Jesus says, "**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. You did not choose me but I chose you.**" (John 15:15-16)

So if I was chosen to be a part of this community of faith, I must accept the fact that you were chosen as well. The church is that community where we don't get to pick and choose who we are in relationship with. In God's wisdom, someone might be called to be a part of this family of faith specifically because they irritate you – specifically because that irritant is deemed necessary for you to grow into the person you are meant to be. So in a real sense, this school of love is also a laboratory of love – a place where we get to practice on one another.

Terence Grant writes, "**Relationships show us what's truly happening in our life, if we have the courage to face it. They reveal this separate, unreal self of ours who wants to isolate us from the rest of the human race! If we come to church on Sunday with the notion, 'I'm here to be alone with God, I'm here to do my private devotion,' we're living in a dream world. There is no such thing as a solitary Christian.**" (in *The Silence of Unknowing*)

If you are like me, the idea of being *commanded* to love can be a stumbling block. Our defenses go up as soon as we are commanded to do anything. That is why I like the way it is expressed in The Message translation. There it reads, "**Make yourselves at home in my love. If you keep my commands, you'll remain intimately at home in my love.**" Doesn't that have a softer tone to it? Make yourself at home in the love of the Beloved. Get comfortable with this thought. Snuggle up with it.

Of course, we have come to know that there are different types of learners. In this school of love, the hearts of some are melted with mind-blowing, abstract thinking. While for others, some truth is better caught than taught. For some, you might be more likely to "get it" when you hear the words "this is my life, broken for you." When we receive the bread together, and absorb this bread into our very bodies, perhaps then we "get it." Let us hear with fresh ears the words we read this morning: "**This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends.**" (15:12-13)

Some of you are starting to wonder when we will get around to the part of changing the world. Now of course we are called to be agents of change in the world. Of course we are to bear a prophetic witness in the darkness of our time. But if we can't first learn to be a healthy community of faith in this school of love, our light will soon flicker out. In this school of love we

*do* need to learn how to resist evil, we *do* need to develop loving courage to find our prophetic voice, but to that end might we also need to bake casseroles for the sick, shovel the sidewalks of the elderly, and hold the hand of the dying. We need the capability to develop long term relationships in this school of love, even with those who develop Alzheimer's.

Of course, even with the best of intentions, some faith communities can devolve in tragic ways. You might think of this as a shameless promotion for the Adult Education series we are in the midst of on the Confession of Belhar. Without going into all the details here, you might think of this as a powerful, prophetic word directed at the church when it has refused to include those whom the Beloved has called friends. Won't you consider joining us?

We would be well-served to remember that this passage that we read this morning is from a larger section known as Jesus' Farewell Discourse. Therefore it was in the very days before his horrific execution that he said, **"I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete."** (15:11) In other words, there is nothing Pollyannaish about this school of love. Rather than a sentimental love, this school of love enables us to process and absorb the harshest of realities.

Paul J. Wadell writes: **"To speak of friendship with God can sound so cozy and consoling, as if we are all snuggling up to God; however, there is no riskier vulnerability than to live in friendship with God, because every friendship changes us, because friends have expectations of each other, and because friends are said to be committed to the same things. Any friend of God is called to faithfully embody the ways of God in the world, *even to the point of suffering on account of them.* There may be grace and glory in being a friend of God, but there is also clearly a cost."** (in *Becoming Friends*)

In conclusion, I am thankful that I have inherited each of you as friends for this season. In this school of love, may each of us be guided to the particular make-up sessions we most need.

Amen.

John 15:9-17 (NRSV)

“As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. “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. “I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.

““This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. “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. “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. “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. “I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.