

6th Sunday of Easter
May 1, 2016
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Decorah, Iowa
Rev. Amy Larson
"Bring Friends to Worship Sunday"

A few weeks ago, Good Shepherd member Lise Kildegaard made an announcement about Bring Friends to Worship Day and she said something like, "so if you have any friends, bring them to church on May 1." Everyone laughed, of course, but Lise got me thinking - she's good at that, she's a professor.

I got to thinking about how these days many of us wish we had more friends, or more time with friends, or deeper friendships, or friends who live closer to us. That longing is one reason it's so helpful to be connected to a congregation. It can be a great place to make and strengthen friendships. It's also why it's such a gift to get to worship with more friends today. Friends who are guests today - thank you for being here. Your presence is a blessing.

In our busy, fragmented, mobile society it can be hard to build and sustain meaningful and lasting friendships. But *because* we are so busy, fragmented, and mobile, we need friendship even more.

We need friends who know us, remind us who we are, and help us be the way we want to be.

We need people in whose company we feel at home.

We need friends to walk with us through the joys and challenges of life.

Our Gospel reading today shows us that, in many ways, God does those same things for us. The God we experience through Jesus and the Holy Spirit gives us a rich and deep companionship. Jesus knows us and reminds us who we are. We are beloved of God and friends of God.

We get so many other messages from the world today. Our culture tells us that our value comes from how much we consume and how well we compete. In direct and indirect ways we hear that we aren't good enough and don't measure up - that we have to be more and do more and have more. Jesus looks at us and says, "Beloved." Jesus calls us friends as we'll hear later in his farewell discourse. Jesus shows us that God our creator sees us the same way:

God the creator calls us beloved;

longs to be in relationship with us;

longs to make a home with us and to have us be at home in God.

We are more than how our culture sees us - more than consumers and competitors. We are beloved friends of God. Yet it is so easy to forget and doubt this identity, so Jesus helps us be who we want to be. Jesus tells us to keep his word - that is to follow his commands to love and serve others. Jesus promises that as we do this, we will experience the presence of God more fully.

It's not that we have to follow his commands in order for God to view us as beloved and want to be with us. God's love for us is a given. Rather, it seems Jesus knows that it's hard for us to trust that we really are friends of God. We never *think* we're good enough, we never *feel* good enough. It seems Jesus knows that we can't think or feel our way into knowing that we are beloved friends of God. We have to live our way into it. We need concrete things that help us live as friends of God for us to trust that this really is who we are. Friendship grows and deepens through actions. No matter how many times my dear friend Sarah tells me to make myself at home in her house, I'll only really feel at home if I actually spend time there. And, if I want Sarah to know how important she is to me, it really helps to spend time with her.

The same thing happens in our relationship with God. As we live as God's friends by doing the things God wants to see happen in our world - love and service - we get to know more of God and we get to experience more of God's love for us and all the world. In addition to Jesus' guidance in his commands, we also aren't alone as we seek to live in God's ways. God the creator sent the Holy Spirit to be our advocate or, as some translations of the Gospel reading say, our comforter or helper. The word translated here as advocate means something like "the one who comes along beside." The Holy Spirit comes alongside us and walks with us through this life.

The Holy Spirit guides and teaches us.

The Spirit also reminds us of everything Jesus has said.

The Spirit reminds us that we are beloved friends of God, called to love and serve.

It is often said that "A friend is someone who knows the song in your heart and can sing it back to you when you have forgotten the words." The Holy Spirit does a similar thing for us. The Spirit knows our truest song is that we and all people are God's beloved and the Spirit sings this song back to us when we forget. *And*, when we forget that God is with us, the Spirit reminds us of God's presence.

It is this assurance of God's presence that gives us true peace - peace not as the world gives. The world says that peace comes when we have enough things, when we do well, when things are going well. Jesus says peace comes from God's presence with us in everything we face - all the joys and challenges.

God is present by the power of the Holy Spirit.

God knows us, helps us, is at home with us, and walks with us in all that we face.

God is here, do not be afraid, do not let your hearts be troubled.

Let's take a few moments to simply rest in the peace and presence of God here among us.