

**Celebration of New Ministry Service - September 21, 2008**  
**Joshua 1:7-9; Psalm 146; Romans 12:1-18; John 15:9-16**  
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The anonymous work entitled *Theologia Germanica* was written in the mid fourteenth century. It became popular after being discovered by Martin Luther in the sixteenth century. In fact, Luther's preface is still part of this work. The writing itself seems to have grown out of a German renewal movement called "The Friends of God". Taking their cue from a part of our Gospel reading for today, "I have called you friends." Consonant with the Gospel of John, the writings of the *Theologia Germanica* are aimed at moving readers from an external knowledge of God to a more intimate faith and experience of the living Lord. Adherents to The Friends of God movement also lived in piety, and obedience to Christ's commandments.

Does the word commandment make you want to stand to attention? Does it invoke an image of strict hierarchy, or even a military-style structure? How many of you are having flashbacks to your own days of service to our country, by duty or choice? We are all used to hearing the Ten Commandments, Jesus' Great Commandment and His New Commandment. Yet as children of the twenty-first century, you and I bear the weight of hundreds of years of socio-cultural indoctrination in the value of autonomy. That is to the point where the words, "command" and "commandment" have the power to jolt us and grate a little against our innate sense of freedom and control, **and** our tendency towards independence. God's commandments are about creating order from chaos, and righteousness from rebellion. Ultimately, they are divine charges for orderly living that draw us into righteousness and reconciliation with God and one another. As such, the commandments we read about in the Gospel of John and elsewhere in Scripture are fundamentally about community, just as the Holy Trinity is a relationship of perfect community: three in one.

It should be no surprise then, that Jesus uses commandment language to help His disciples understand God's expectations for orderly life in community as well as personal discipleship. According to the *Theologia Germanica*, individuals deal with the commandments for divine order in four different ways. Some will obey because they feel compelled to do so out of a sense of duty. Others obey laws and rules because they are seeking a reward for their behavior, or perhaps because they believe they can earn the gift of eternal life. Thirdly, there are those who already think they are perfect just as they are and live according to their own rule. They reject the rules made by others – divine or human. Finally, there are those who desire to obey God's commandments purely out of love, and I believe, a heart filled with gratitude for all God's good gifts.

After these past several weeks of sharing in the scandalous paradox of living into the greater reality of God's kingdom, I think you all know what I'm going to say next. But I'm going to say it anyway. This passage from John's Gospel is astonishing in its beauty and in its invitation. "I do not call you servants any longer... but I have called you friends," says Jesus to His disciples. The expectations are clear – to keep God's commandments. Yet we know that only God's love can empower our hearts to embrace this yearning for God's order, not as a burden, but as pure delight. That is what makes us friends of God.

Our understanding of friendship has changed dramatically over the centuries. Interestingly, the predominant cultural expression of friendship across time also gives us some insight into the values of each society. The Platonic ideal was a reciprocal relationship between men of equal standing in society, mostly to create political alliances. Fast forward to the Middle Ages, where friendship described patrons and benefactors who helped to secure the future of family fortunes and property rights. Fortunately, that was not the only voice. The twelfth-century Cistercian monk Aelred, abbot of Rievaulx Abbey in my home county of Yorkshire, England understood God to be friendship. Aelred wrote extensively on the importance of friendship in the life of every Christian

for our spiritual health. Today, we might count as friends everyone from a more casual acquaintance to those we call our best friends. The German renewal movement of The Friends of God had their own ideas, but practically speaking what does it mean for you and me to be friends of God and Jesus? Do you and I readily include Jesus' name on our own list of friends?

Let us take a walk in Jesus' sandals for a few minutes to see through His eyes those whom God calls friends. From the Hebrew Scriptures that Jesus heard and read, He knew both Moses and Abraham to be friends of God because of their righteousness, and obedience to God's Law. But then there is David, a man after God's own heart, who is also a murderer. From our Gospel reading, Jesus describes His chosen disciples as His friends. In other readings, we have the mental images of Jesus stirring up the dust as He walks from town-to-town making friends with the utterly despised tax collectors, prostitutes, the sick, the lame, and the demonized in all senses of the word. He also counts among His friends thieves, the desperate and dispossessed, and the poorest of the poor. That list is starting to look a little shocking in its unbounded generosity and inclusiveness. So are we all ready to say that anyone who is a friend of Jesus is a friend of mine? Perhaps like me, your modern sensibilities are honed to the point that it is much tougher to emulate Jesus' extravagant hospitality and grace towards some in our midst, by the same measure as we do with others. The good news is that by God's grace and the power of the Holy Spirit, you and I are still works in progress.

At their linguistic roots the words 'friend' and 'love' have a common lineage, and that is how we know the characteristics of a friend of God. Abiding in the friendship of God, means showing God's love through the compassionate care of all God's precious children, especially those who are marginalized and rejected by the world. Living as God's friend, is about using the power that comes from God's gift of wealth to promote justice, equality and peace. As friends of God, we welcome the Holy Spirit as the counselor of your thoughts and my thoughts, as we minister to all in this bruised and fragmented world. It is the Holy Spirit who puts the words in our mouths, and guides us to right actions for the glory of God. Loving God, being a friend of God, is exactly like the gifts you share so generously with our neighbors near and far. Like the wonderful gift of hospitality to all our visitors, and to those in our community who meet here weekly for support, or come to events like our annual rummage sale. It is like your faithful and generous support of the Love Kitchen, when you drop off a bag of groceries in the collection baskets at the back of the church. Or how you share your time and financial gifts with the St. Andrew's clinic, where children come from across the border clutching nothing but hope for a new start in life. Being God's friend is like taking an angel tag or two off the tree at Christmas to buy gifts for the children of prisoners. It is through your gift of love that they know prison bars are no barrier to a mother or father's love. This is the fruit lasts. Truly, this is the fruit of the Spirit, and just a few examples of the living presence and joy that shines in and through this community and our ministries.

"I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete," says Jesus. As 'love' and 'friend' are intimately connected in word and deed, so too is the dynamic relationship between 'grace' and 'joy'. The joy that God desires for us is nothing less than an outpouring of divine grace. This is the gift of God that you and I are blessed to share as we practice God's graciousness within and beyond this community. Joan Chittister has described friendship as "the sacrament of possibility." My friends, as we celebrate our new ministry together this day, let us give thanks for the gracious promise that with God all things are possible.

Amen.