Nu‘uanu Congregational Church

Sixth Sunday of Easter

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SERVANTS NO LONGER John 15:9–17

“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 my friends, because I have made known to you

everything that I have heard from God, my

Father.” —John 15:12-15

This morning, I would like to begin the sermon with something I have already shared with you in another sermon, and that is a brief outline of three different kinds of service. This exploration of the different kinds of service is not new with me. I discovered it in Sandra Schneiders insightful commentary on John’s Gospel, *Written That You May Believe.* An educator once told me that something has to be repeated at least three times in order for adults to learn something new. So this is just the second time I am sharing these insights into the different kinds of service.

First, there is the service that someone with little power must do for someone who has both power and authority. This is the service a child performs in relation to parents, a slave in relation to an owner, a subject in relation to a ruler, and in a patriarchal society a woman in relation to a man, or a wife in relation to a husband. Whatever the circumstances in this model of service, what is rendered arises from a fundamental condition of inequality between two persons. The relationship between the server and the served is characterized by the power of the served over the server rather than equality between the server and the served. The relationship between the two can easily lead to exploitation and oppression, simply because the service is demanded as the right of the one who is superior and *must be rendered* by the one who is inferior.

In the history of Hawai‘i, we think back to the days before the sugar workers were organized into a union. The plantation owners, simply because they were owners, controlled every aspect of the lives of the sugar workers who served in the fields of the plantation. The union did not bring full equality between the workers and owners, but the playing ground was somewhat leveled, so that the workers had a say about the service they performed and how much they were to be compensated.

This first model of service exists in our world wherever there is inequality between the server and the served. The second model of service is also based upon an inequality between the server and the served but this time the one who serves is the one who holds the power and the one who is served occupies the lesser position in the relationship. This is the service done by the rich for the poor, the parent for the child, the professional for the client, the *kahu* for the member of the church, and the strong for the weak. In this model, the server has something that will benefit the one who is served, and the served sees that it is in his or her interest to receive that which the server can give. This model is to be distinguished from the first because here the service is rendered *freely* rather than under compulsion. This makes it a higher form of service. In fact, the server can genuinely seek the good of another without being required to do so. This form of service can be commendable. Yet, this model is still based upon a condition of inequality. The act of service does not alter the fact that the server still retains a position of power in the act of serving.

There is yet another danger inherent in this model of service. The service rendered can actually feed the self-importance of the one who serves. The parent can serve the child as a way to enhance control over the child. The teacher can make his or her students into trophies. The priest or minister can treat the laity he or she serves as children in order to maintain an aura of self-importance and knowledge. The doctor can deliberately mystify his patients in order to feed his or her own power. The process by which power is enhanced through service is a subtle one and often not all that obvious. But the danger is there, anytime one who is powerful serves one who needs his or her service.

Much Christian service has been done through this model. The members of the church help those who are in need without seeing those who are served as equals. There is a name for this. It is called paternalism. Much of the history of American Christian missions, when it is carefully studied, reveals a spirit of paternalism. We need only recall how some, and I emphasize the word *some,* American Christian missionaries carried out their ministry in Hawai‘i. Native Hawaiians were not viewed by these well-intentioned and often kind missionaries as equals; they were viewed as pagans, as children who needed to be saved.

this is service that is rendered among friends. In this model, the relationship between the server and the served is characterized by equality. In fact, friendship is the one human relationship based upon equality. If friendship does not begin among equals, and often it does not, the inequality is soon abolished once the friendship is established. The inequality that may have been present in the beginning becomes irrelevant within the structure of the relationship. In friendship, the good of each is truly the other’s good, and in seeking the good of the friend, one’s own good is achieved. The service that is rendered between friends is never demanded. It creates no debts and demands no return but is an expression of reciprocity and mutuality. Domination is totally foreign to friendship.

According to this morning’s passage from John, the highest, purest, form of friendship is the laying down one’s life for one’s friend. All other acts of service within friendship approach this ultimate, purest, act of service.

John’s Gospel is unique in the way it offers friendship as the model for relationships within the Christian community. The other Gospels all have stories that approach the values of reciprocity and equality, but they also reflect hierarchical structures and relationships based upon power. Take the example of Peter. In Matthew, Mark, and Luke, Peter gains pre-eminence among the followers of Jesus. In Matthew, he is called the rock upon which the church is built. Not so in the Gospel of John. The Johannine Community saw itself as a contrast to the Jerusalem church in which Peter was the named leader. In the Johannine community, Jesus is the only leader, and his leadership is ultimately expressed in an act of friendship. He lays down his life for his friends.

In John’s Gospel, God’s saving intention is expressed in terms of self-gift. God so loved the world that God gives (the emphasis is on the word *gives*) God’s only Son to save us. And Jesus so loves his own in the world that he lays down his life for them. The self-gift of Jesus was not, in John’s Gospel, a master’s redemption of unworthy slaves but an act of friendship. “No longer do I call you servants . . . you I have called friends.”

Here, I want to take the opportunity to make an observation about our life together here in the place. I am being honest when I say that I think that this sermon has been unnecessary in a way. For I find that you are a community that does indeed practice the kind of service between friends that Jesus envisioned in John Chapter 25.

I find an absence of relationships based in inequality and hierarchy in the life of our church. I have yet to detect anyone or any group of people within the church who wish to exert control or power over others. There is an equality among you that is remarkable. Perhaps, in some ways, you do need to understand that pastor and people are equally called to ministry, and that your pastor is simply someone who is called to a particular ministry within the larger ministry of all the members. But I do believe that you know what Jesus meant when he said, “No longer do I call you servants . . . you I have called friends.”

There is one more thing I would like to say. Recently, in a column in the *Honolulu Advertiser* (4/21/18), David

In John’s Gospel, the highest form of service is the service between friends. Clearly, in our own church community and in our families, we have a long ways to go. It will help, however, if we keep this morning’s passage from John’s Gospel in our hearts and minds as we make life’s journey together. If we know how it *should* be in the church and in all of life’s settings, then we may begin to live towards the ideal. May God grant us the grace and strength so to do.