

**Sermon for Installation of the Rev. Matt Matthews**  
**1<sup>st</sup> Presbyterian Church, Champaign, IL**  
**Preached by the Rev. Furman Buchanan**  
**April 8, 2018**

**Joshua 1:7-9**  
**John 15:9-16**  
**Romans 12:1-18**  
**1381 words**

In the hallway outside my church office is a tiny microwave. Someone probably donated this appliance when they realized you can heat water for tea *faster* with a magnifying glass and a little sunshine. Matt Matthews knows that proper tea must be served hot, and yet he was still willing to have tea at my office every other week.

This is just who he is—longsuffering for the sake of friendship. In the 15<sup>th</sup> chapter of John’s Gospel, Jesus has something to say about friendship. “As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love.” This sounds overly broad and—impossible. How can we possibly love *that much*?

Jesus answers our question. He says, “If you keep my commandments, you *will abide* in my love.” So, it sounds like love is more than a feeling—it takes commitment, devotion, patience, and perseverance.

There’s another embarrassing thing about my office microwave. It’s on the floor—beneath a small table where the coffee maker is set. You can tell that the coffee drinkers rule at my church...while the tiny minority of longsuffering tea drinkers kneel down as if to pray.

Matt would kneel down on Wednesdays—like it was prayer meeting—and turn the dial on that feeble appliance. Here’s the thing—it *was* prayer meeting for us. It was our time to talk about hopes and dreams. It was a time of listening tenderly to one another’s challenges and laments. It was a time to simply abide—in God’s love, and in the love of a neighbor.

Jesus said, “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.”(Now, I did not lay down my life for Matt, but sometimes I would arrive early and kneel down to microwave his mug of water before he arrived.) Friends don’t let friends drink lukewarm tea...*or* do all the kneeling. Rather, friends meet together. Friends rejoice together. Friends cry together. Friends work together. Friends...pray together.

I believe we spend a lot of time focused on how to be Jesus’ disciples. And not *nearly* enough time thinking of how we might be Jesus’ *friends*. John chapter 15 doesn’t just *permit* such thinking. It encourages such thinking! For Jesus said, “I do not call you servants any longer; but friends.”

I read a book this past Lent entitled *Love Big, Be Well*. It is a fictional collection of letters that are deeply true. The collection begins with a letter written by Amy, the chairperson of a pastor search committee. Her committee is weary after interviewing one ‘expert’ after another. She has met her fill of professional clergy, eager to fix their dying church. Amy said to her committee, “I just want to write a letter to future candidates and make them actually write back. With a pen. And real paper.”

“Dear Potential Pastor,” Amy wrote, to whomever might choose to read about unremarkable Granby Presbyterian Church. “We have a few questions for you...We’d like to know if you’re going to use us. Will our church be your opportunity to right all the Church’s wrongs...*or* might we hope that our church could be a place where you’d settle in with us and love alongside us, cry with us and curse the darkness with us, and remind us how much God is crazy about us?” Each weary member of the search committee signed that letter.

I don’t know anything about your search committee, but if they wrote that kind of thoughtful, personal letter, it would have been like tossing meat in front of a tiger. Matt Matthews is nothing, if not thoughtful. Matt Matthews is nothing, if not personal. Matt Matthews is nothing, if not a writer of what is true and good and beautiful.

The *fictional* search committee’s letter ended up on the nightstand of Jonas McAnn, a weary pastor who had left a dying church to take a job that could pay a living wage. He was trapped in a cubicle of an insurance company, and it was Easter. With nothing to lose, he wrote back a letter with pen and real paper.

Dear Amy, Luther, Tom and Hank, “If this candidate process leads anywhere, we’d have to hold one another up...I’d hold you up on your weak days, and you’d hold me up on mine...I committed my life to walking alongside people who I hoped to call friends. I committed to learning how to help people pray.”

The reading we heard from Joshua is about a new leader, called by God to be strong and courageous. Like fictional Jonas McAnn or real, life Matt Matthews, new leaders are called by God to be strong and courageous. They, in turn, call God’s *people* to be strong and courageous...so they don’t wander off too far to the right or to the left...so they keep the Commandments that invite us to love God more deeply, and love our neighbors as ourselves...so we keep the Commandments that foster community—and ultimately, unity—that we discover as *mutual friends of Jesus*, abiding in the love of God.

Remember, we are not just called to be *disciples* of Jesus. We are called to be *friends* of Jesus—and therefore, friends with one another—Trusting that God walks with us...beside us...reminding us...to meet together. Rejoice together. Cry together. Sweat together. Pray together. And by doing these things, to gain strength and courage...to love as God loves.

Marilynne Robinson won the Pulitzer Prize for her novel entitled *Gilead*. Her protagonist describes the writings of *your favorite* 16<sup>th</sup> century reformer named John Calvin like this: “Calvin describes each of us as an actor on a stage and *God* is the audience. This metaphor makes us artists of our behavior, and the reaction of God to us might be thought of as aesthetic rather than morally judgmental in the ordinary sense. How well do we understand our role? With how much assurance do we perform it? Calvin’s image suggests how God might actually *enjoy* us. (After all,) the world exists for God’s enjoyment...”<sup>1</sup>

So, I have some good news and some bad news. First, the bad news. You have called an amateur to be your next pastor. He does not know all the things that experts know about fixing the church. He does not have all the answers that experts have to address your problems.

Now, the good news. You have called an amateur to be your next pastor. He is precisely what this word means—one who does what he does *for love*. For the love of God, Matt is calling forth your strength and courage. For the love of neighbor, Matt is willing to kneel down to pray and to serve. For the sake of love, Matt is inviting you on stage to perform for the delight of God, while also showing your neighbors and the world what friends of Jesus are capable of showing—strength and courage, justice and peace, mercy and healing, faith, hope, and love.

This amateur director will help you understand the roles you perform. This amateur director will challenge you to perform with the assurance that God *wants* to delight in us. Remember, God wants to call us friends. God wants to love us, and then watch that same love being performed in ways that bless other people.

May I remind you that God does not call experts to testify to a distant truth. God calls regular and devoted amateurs to perform a *real* and *lived* truth. And the truth is this: We are loved by God as if we are friends. And Jesus has shown us how to perform. The stage is big enough for all of you to stand together. Your script calls for you to hold one another up on your weak days. *And* to remind one another how much God is crazy about us!

So, dear people of God, may your ways be prosperous and may your ministries be fruitful to the glory of God. May you be strong and courageous as friends of Jesus. And may you be blessed to discover the gift of being amateurs, faithful friends who do what you do *for no other reason* than for love. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Marilynne Robinson, *Gilead* ( NY: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2004 ), p. 124-125.