

## **John 15: 9-17**

**FAITHFUL GOD, MAKE OUR HEARTS BOLD WITH LOVE FOR ONE ANOTHER. POUR OUT YOUR SPIRIT UPON US THAT WE MAY WORSHIP WITH PRAISE THE NEW SONG OF YOUR MARVELOUS VICTORY IN JESUS. AMEN.**

**I RECENTLY WATCHED A SHOW ON PBS ABOUT A BASEBALL FIELD LOCATED 45 MILES WEST OF PIERRE AND OVER 25 MILES FROM THE NEAREST TOWN, WHERE A LIGHTED BALL FIELD RISES FROM SOUTH DAKOTA'S SHORTGRASS. IT WAS THE BALLFIELD AT FOUR CORNERS..THE CORNERS OF HIGHWAYS 14W, 14E, 34 AND 63. I WAS INTRIGUED AS THE FIELD IS CLOSE TO ONE OF MY FIRST CHURCHES, THE LITTLE BROWN CHURCH IN HAYES SD! ROY NORMAN WAS THE INSPIRATION BEHIND THE BALL DIAMOND AND HIS SON WAS AN ACTIVE MEMBER OF MY CHURCH. AS I WATCHED THE SHOW, I WONDERED IF THE SUNDAY AFTERNOON GAMES CONSISTED OF TWO OF THE BIGGER BOYS BEING CAPTAINS AND CHOOSING SIDES. DO YOU REMEMBER HOW THAT WENT? ULTIMATELY, THE SAME KIDS ALWAYS CHOSEN FIRST AND ULTIMATELY, THE SMALLER ONES ALWAYS CHOSEN LAST. I WAS SURPRISED TO LEARN THAT THE GAMES AT FOUR CORNERS WAS MORE SERIOUS THAN THAT AND HOW ROY NORMAN WOULD POST IN THE LOCAL PAPER WANT ADS FOR FARM HELP REQUIRING STRENGTH AND BASEBALL SKILL!**

**PERHAPS SOME OF YOU REMEMBER THAT FEELING OF NEVER BEING CHOSEN FOR THE TEAM IN GYM CLASS OR GAMES WITH NEIGHBORHOOD FRIENDS. WELL GOOD NEWS BECAUSE THE KEY TO OUR GOSPEL LESSON THIS MORNING IS THAT CHRIST HAS CHOSEN US, ASKED THAT WE BE ON HIS SIDE, A MEMBER OF HIS TEAM. WE DIDN'T PICK HIM. HE SOUGHT US OUT, RECRUITED US AS IT WERE, NOT BY COERCION, NOT BY OUR TALENTS, BUT OUT OF LOVING CARE, OUT OF BELIEF IN US, OUT OF CONCERN THAT WE GET TO KNOW HIM, ENJOY FELLOWSHIP TOGETHER, AND BECOME ALL WE ARE CAPABLE OF BEING. THIS IS AN IMPORTANT KEY TO UNDERSTANDING SCRIPTURE. ALL WE ARE AND DO AS PEOPLE OF FAITH IS IN RESPONSE TO GOD'S GRACIOUS OVERTURES AND ACTIONS ON OUR BEHALF. WE ARE CALLED, CHOSEN, AND CHERISHED BY THE ONE WHO CREATED US AND SENT HIS SON TO DIE FOR US.**

**DIETRICH BONHOEFFER, THE REVERED GERMAN MARTYR WHO WAS KILLED RESISTING HILTER'S THIRD REICH IN 1945, DESCRIBED THE CHURCH AS "CHRIST TAKING FORM IN A BODY OF BELIEVERS." CHRIST TAKING FORM IN A BODY OF BELIEVERS. SCIENTISTS REALIZE THAT THIS WORLD IN WHICH WE EXIST IS NOT SOME GIGANTIC MACHINE. IT IS A VITAL, DYNAMIC, CREATIVE, ECOLOGICAL NETWORK OF LIFE---PRODUCING AND SUSTAINING ENERGY, PULSATING AMONG INTERRELATING SYSTEMS THROUGHOUT THE UNIVERSE. EVEN SO, THE CHURCH IS NOT SO MUCH AN INSTITUTION WITH RULES, REGULATIONS, AND RITUALS AS IT**

IS AN INTRICATE BODY OF RELATIONSHIPS. MORE THAN AN ORGANIZATION, IT'S AN ORGANISM---PEOPLE WHO LOVE GOD, SEEK TO DO GOD'S WILL, LOVE AND CHERISH EACH OTHER, TREAT OTHERS WITH DIGNITY AND HONESTY, GLADLY CARING FOR EACH OTHER'S NEEDS, AND BUIDLING BRIDGES OF UNDERSTANDING AND PEACE.

THERE'S A WORD FOR IT. THAT WORD IS COVENANT. THE CONCEPT GOES BACK TO NOAH. MAYBE YOU'VE HEARD ABOUT THE GRANDFATHER WHO WAS TELLING THE STORY OF NOAH AND THE FLOOD TO HIS FOUR-YEAR-OLD GRANDSON. THE CHILD LOOKED AT HIS GRANDFATHER AND ASKED, "PAPA, WERE YOU IN THE ARK?" "NO I WASN'T," ANSWERED THE GRANDFATHER. "THEN WHY DIDN'T YOU DROWN?" ASKD THE CHILD. GOD'S COVENANT WITH NOAH WAS RENEWED PERIODICALLY WITH ABRAHAM, MOSES, THE PROPHETS AND THEN WITH JESUS IN THE NEW COVENANT.

A COVENANT IS NOT THE SAME AS A CONTRACT. A CONTRACT IS A BINDING LEGAL AGREEMENT BETWEEN TWO OR MORE PARTIES FOR THE DOING OR NOT DOING OF SOMETHING SPECIFIED. A COVENANT, ON THE OTHER HAND, IS VERY PERSONAL, AN ACT OF FAITH AND TRUST BETWEEN INDIVIDUALS. IT'S A SPIRITUAL BOND, A MORAL COMMITMENT. THE WORDS OF OUR GOSPEL ARE A LAST WILL AND TESTAMENT BETWEEN JESUS AND HIS DISCIPLES. THE LORD BARES HIS SOUL IN HIS LAST HOURS ON EARTH. THESE ARE FAMOUS LAST WORDS. HE MAKES IT CLEAR TO HIS FOLLOWERS THAT THEY ARE NOT SERVANTS BUT FRIENDS. A SERVANT DOES NOT KNOW WHAT HIS MASTER IS DOING, AS JESUS POINTED OUT. FRIENDS, ON THE OTHER HAND, ARE ABSOLUTELY OPEN AND HONEST WITH EACH OTHER. WE HEARD AN AMAZING PRESENTATION YESTERDAY BY JULIE ROSS ON FRIENDSHIP. JESUS SAID TO HIS DISCIPLES, "I HAVE MADE KNOWN TO YOU EVERYTHING I HAVE HEARD FROM MY FATHER. WE HAVE SHARED FULLY AND FREELY." AND MOST IMPORTANT OF ALL, FRIENDS VALUE EACH OTHER'S LIVES AS MUCH AS THEY VALUE THEIR OWN. THEY ARE WILLING TO LAY THEIR LIVES DOWN FOR EACH OTHER.

A DENTIST WAS DRILLING ON A MAN'S TEETH ONE DAY AND DIDN'T THINK NOVOCAIN WAS NEEDED BUT STRUCK A NERVE AND THE MAN JUMPED. THE DENTIST SAID, "THAT'S GETTING DOWN TO WHERE YOU LIVE, ISN'T IT?"

OUR GOSPEL TODAY IS GETTING DOWN WHERE WE LIVE ISN'T IT?

A DIMENSION OF FRIENDSHIP SOMETIMES OVERLOOKED IS MUTUAL FRIENDSHIP. HOW OFTEN HAVE YOU MET A STRANGER AND IN THE CONVERSATION DISCOVERED THAT YOU BOTH KNEW ANOTHER PERSON? IMMEDIATELY YOUR WORDS BECAME MORE ANIMATED, OUR INTEREST WAS HEIGHTENED, THE VIBE STRONGER. YOU WERE PREPARED TO GET TO KNOW EACH OTHER BETTER. SO IT IS IN THE COMMUNITY OF FAITH.

DR. PETER STOREY, A GREAT SPIRITUAL LEADER IN SOUTH AFRICA WHO WORKED ALONG WITH ARCHBISHOP TUTU AND PRESIDENT NELSON MANDELA IN DISMANTLING APARTHEID, SAYS THAT WHEN WE INVITE CHRIST INTO OUR LIVES, CHRIST INSISTS THAT WE LET HIM BRING HIS FRIENDS WITH HIM. JESUS MADE IT UNMISKTABLE THAT WE CANNOT TRULY LOVE HIM AND NOT ALSO LOVE THOSE HE LOVES AND THOSE FOR WHOM HE DIED.

IN OUR GOSPEL JESUS MAKES AN URGENT APPEAL THAT OUR LIVES MAKE A DIFFERENCE BY BEING FRUITFUL. AND THIS CAN HAPPEN WHEN WE CATCH ON TO JESUS' ANALOGY OF HIMSELF AS THE VINE, WE ARE THE BRANCHES, AND GOD AS THE VINEDRESSER. THAT SYSTEM WORKS: THE VINE DRAWING ITS ENERGY FROM THE SUN, THE SOIL, AND RAIN; YOU AND I DRAWING STRENGTH FROM THE VINE; AND GOD CULTIVATING THE WHOLE PROCESS. GOD HAS CHOSEN US. GOD IS WITH AND IN US, AND GOD IS IN CHARGE EMPOWERING US. AS COMMITTED CHRISTIANS WE ARE NOT DOING OUR WORK. WE'RE NOT EVEN DOING GOD'S WORK. *GOD IS DOING GOD'S WORK THROUGH US.*

THAT'S WHY JESUS MAKES THE ASTOUNDING STATEMENT THAT THE FATHER WILL GIVE US WHATEVER WE ASK IN HIS NAME---NOT ANYTHING WE WANT, NOT ANYTHING THAT WE MIGHT TRY TO DO, BUT WHAT GOD WANTS AND WILLS THROUGH US.

IN 1975 JANIS IAN WROTE THE SONG "SEVENTEEN". ONE OF THE VERSES GOES "TO THOSE OF US WHO KNEW THE PAIN OF VALENTINRS THAT NEVER CAME AND THOSE WHOSE NAMES WERE NEVER CALLED WHEN CHOOSING SIDES FOR BASKETBALL." I KNEW A GIRL WHO KNEW THIS PAIN. WHO WAITED PATIENTLY ON THE SIDELINES WHILE HER CLASSMATES CHOSE TEAMS FOR KICKBALL, DODGEBALL, SOFTBALL....IT DIDN'T MATTER THE GAME. THE PAIN OF BEING THE LAST ONE....THE PAIN OF HEARING A CLASSMATE SAY TO THE OTHER TEAM CAPTAIN, "WE HAD TERI LAST TIME, YOU CAN HAVE HER THIS TIME."

THE PAIN AND HUMILATION OF STANDING THERE. YOU SEE TERI DIDN'T KNOW....SHE DIDN'T KNOW SHE'D ALREADY BEEN CHOSEN BY A BETTER CAPTAIN FOR A FAR BETTER TEAM. SHE DIDN'T KNOW. SHE DIDN'T KNOW. SO THE PAIN LINGERED. UNTIL THE SUMMER OF 1980 ON THE SHORES OF LAKE POINSETT AT A CHURCH CAMP WHERE SHE HEARD A SPEAKER SHARE THE GOSPEL THAT CHRIST HAD CHOSEN TERI; CLAIMED HER; LOVED HER. SHE WAS SPECIAL IN THE EYES OF GOD WHO MADE HER, NO ONE IN THE WORLD WAS JUST LIKE HER. WHEN I ARRIVED HOME AFTER CAMP MY MOM KNEW INSTANTLY SOMETHING WAS DIFFERENT ABOUT ME.

WE'VE BEEN CHOSEN! CHRIST CHOOSES US AS HIS OWN..AS HIS FRIENDS TO LOVE AND SERVE. IS THERE ANY BETTER NEWS THAN THIS? THE ONLY THING I CAN THINK OF IS WHEN YOUNG TERI WAS NEVER CHOSEN FOR ALL THOSE TEAMS IN GYMNASIUM CLASSES OVER THE YEARS SHE WOULD HAVE HAD THE KNOWLEDGE AND COURAGE TO STAND UP AND PROUDLY SAY, "THAT'S OK, I'M ALREADY ON A BETTER TEAM." AMEN.

**FATHER IN HEAVEN, WE ARE FRIENDS TO ONE ANOTHER, NOT BECAUSE WE ARE SO LOVABLE AND ENDEARING, OR BECAUSE WE CHOOSE TO BE WITH PEOPLE WHO ARE LIKE OURSELVES, BUT BECAUSE YOU WANT US, AS YOUR CHILDREN, TO REACH OUT WITH THE BEST FOR OTHER PEOPLE, WHOEVER THEY ARE AND WHATEVER THEIR CHARACTERISTICS. THANK YOU FOR MAKING US YOUR FRIENDS, AND FRIENDS TO ONE ANOTHER. LORD IN YOUR MERCY**

**WE MARVEL HOW YOUR SPIRIT TAKES JESUS TO THE OUTSIDERS, THOSE WHO ARE NEVER CHOSEN AND OVERLOOKED. MAY WE WELCOME THEM AS ONE WITH US. LOVINGLY WASH US ALL CLEAN AND SOW THE RISEN CHRIST LIKE A NEW SEED, TO SPROUT AND GROW IN OUR LIVES. LORD IN YOUR MERCY**

**THANK YOU FOR RECEIVING US AS FRIENDS AT YOUR TABLE WHERE WE HAVE BEEN NOURISHED BY THE BODY AND BLOOD OF CHRIST GIVEN BY THE SPIRIT IN THE BREAD AND WINE. REFRESH THOSE WHO ARE TIRED, HEAL THOSE WHO ARE SICK, AND ENCOURAGE THOSE WHO ARE WEARY. WE ESPECIALLY PRAY FOR:**

**WE THANK YOU FOR HEARING US, THROUGH JESUS OUR RISEN LORD. AMEN.**