***“I Call You Friends”*** by S. Finlan, at The First Church, May 9, 2021

**1 John 5:1–5**

1Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God, and everyone who loves the parent loves the child. 2By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and obey his commandments. 3For the love of God is this, that we obey his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome, 4for whatever is born of God conquers the world. And this is the victory that conquers the world, our faith. 5Who is it that conquers the world but the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?

**John 15:9–17**

9“As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. 10If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love. 11I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.

 12 “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. 13No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. 14You are my friends if you do what I command you. 15I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. 16You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. 17I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.”

Happy Mother’s Day, everyone. Thank you for coming on this beautiful day. Thank you to all the mothers, including those who have passed on, for all their love.

Easter is the season of love, when we talk about the comforting, nurturing, and inspiring nature of God’s love. This is our gift and foundation from God that Jesus reveals to us. The letter of John talks about loving God and people, obeying Jesus’ commandments, and experiencing victory over the world. “This is the victory that conquers the world, our faith” (1 John 5:4). If faith can overcome the world, then faith must bring strength of mind and composure of heart. So, faith is clearly linked with courage and with calmness. And love binds heart and mind together in an effort to understand God’s revelation of love.

According to Jesus, along with our faith come joy and love, or perhaps the joy comes from practicing love. Jesus says if we abide in his love, our joy will be complete (John 15:10–11). There seems to be a cycle of qualities, one of which leads to the other. Love leads to the desire to follow and obey God’s will, obedience to God’s will leads to victory over the world, victory then leads to faith, faith leads to love again, and love leads to joy. I wouldn’t get too dogmatic about that sequence; it seems that each one of the qualities contributes to the other. It’s a beautiful, spiritually-charged tapestry with all the threads connected to each other. Love is woven throughout God’s universe and we get to experience and enrich our lives by sharing God’s love.

Jesus then talks specifically about his love for his apostles, and says that he will lay down his life for his friends. He will no longer call the apostles his servants, but his friends. They are not called just to obey, but to be his trusted friends. Their obedience will not be the slavish obedience of those who meticulously follow a ritualized religious practice, but an obedience that expresses love and creativity. The kingdom of God is not made up of mindless obedient robots, but of distinctive free persons who voluntarily seek spiritual harmony with others. Friends of Jesus will go and bear fruit that will last. Because of this we know that friends of Jesus should be friends of each other, sharing God’s love, motivated by the Spirit of Truth.

Each of Jesus’ friends, and that includes you and me, have inner strength derived from spiritual living, are able to overcome the world, to not be distressed by the world. This community of friends that Jesus envisions is a community of free adults, not needing to emphasize loyal obedience and servitude, but mature freedom, spiritual liberty. He has guided their maturation, and now he is ready to let them go as adults into the world.

In the same way, our mothers and fathers have raised us, and at a certain point they let us go as adults. Mothers are the first people to welcome us into life and to socialize us. A mother’s love is life-giving. Of course, it may be a while before we can look back and realize some of their wisdom. We are grateful to our mothers for devoting themselves to us in our early years, and just as grateful when they let us go as young adults. They don’t abandon us; any time on our journey that we need to re-connect, they are ready to welcome us. But we can’t be children forever, either in our parents’ house or in the world. In the same way, the apostles couldn’t be mere servants forever. They needed to be trusted with leadership and preaching. Jesus knew, and seems to have picked, just the right moment to do that for them. As leaders and preachers, they were peers of Jesus, in a way. That is implied by his emphasis upon them as his friends, to whom he has told everything that he has learned from the Father (John 15:15). They have been shown how to practice love and to preach it. Jesus taught the apostles about God’s love for all of his children. Given the success of the apostles’ efforts to spread the gospel, I think they did succeed as practitioners of mutual love. Love is also one of the secrets of effective preaching. And folks, I love you; call on me if you need a pastoral ear. I can keep your confidentiality.

I think Jesus knew that the apostles’ practice of faith and love had reached sufficient levels, and they would carry on his work effectively after his departure. And he knew that when he left they would receive the Spirit as it was poured out. We now benefit from that Spirit of Truth in our hearts and minds.

He handed over authority to the apostles, even though they were imperfect. They were now empowered to carry the kingdom into the world. And so are we, each one of us, ministers and recommenders of Christ. We have received God’s love and can share that love in word and deed with others. We are ambassadors of love.

Jesus calls *you* a friend, and expects *you* to bear spiritual fruit in the world.

We have been given so many spiritual gifts and talents. Jesus entrusts us to bring God’s love into the world. As we do so we bring heaven here to earth and make God’s will a reality. May God’s will be done.