

## "Church Friends"

This is my commandment,  
that you love one another as I have loved you (John 15:12).

Before the Mayflower Pilgrims set foot onto an unknown land they united themselves together as church. They did so by signing the formal document known as the Salem Church Covenant.

We covenant with the Lord and one with another  
and doe bynd our selves in the presence of God,  
to walke together in all his waies,  
according as he is pleased to reveale himself unto us  
in his blessed word of truth:

Those brave souls knew that their only hope of survival in an unchartered world was to mutually bind themselves together in love as Jesus taught his disciples to do. Their covenantal model for forming community was a Biblical one and came to be known as, The Congregational Way. That first generation of New Englanders were God fearing people who looked to scripture for an understanding of who and whose they were. In constant need of help from above, gospel passages about the bread of life on earth became daily fare at community meals. Gospel study and prayer with scriptures like: "This is my commandment, that you love another as I have loved you ... I do not call you servants any longer ... but I have called you friends" ... you are my friends if you do what I command (John 15:12) fed their souls, breathed courage into their spirits, and shaped their Christian identity and beliefs. The first pilgrims in faith believed in freedom of religion, freedom of individual conscience, and personal responsibility for the practice of one's faith. In matters of faith, no person, priest, pope, or Protestant clergy could tell any good Congregationalist what to think, believe, or do.

For better and worse, Pilgrim faith, practice, and order continue to shape the character of church friends in mainline UUA and UCC congregations today. And so it is that on our worst days, we behave like church friends of the "Jesus Is On Our Side" local church. According to the view of many members in that congregation, the current pastor had overstayed his welcome. One Sunday he stood and declared, "I have been called to a new church and I will be leaving you. The same Jesus that led me to be your pastor is leading me away." There was a moment of uneasy silence before a deacon stood and said, "Let us all join in singing, "What a Friend We Have In Jesus!" (E.Humor).

But on our best days, we behave like church friends who are united by our mutual friendship in Christ. One of the most memorable church friendship experiences that I had was as a teen growing up in the Plymouth, Congregational Church in Plymouth, Ct. It happened in the 1950's when the first family of color moved into town and joined the church. I quickly became a church friend with Becky and later her cheerleading friend. All was going well until one evening when my sister and I went to a Rainbow Girls meeting and my sister invited Becky's sister to come along. When we got to the meeting place, our Rainbow advisors would not allow our friend to come to the meeting because she was black. That night, my sister and I quit the organization because we knew that racism was wrong, not fair, and un-Christian. Also, when I realized that I had learned these principles in church, it dawned on me that the best place to learn how to be a faithful friend was in church---where I could count on friends trying to be the best friend of Jesus that they could be.

Two weeks ago I received a letter from our church friend, Joseph Olsen. His note included a poem and bits of wisdom for me to share with you so that we might remain faithful to the our common goal of being church friends who obey the Jesus command to love one another as He loves us.

*Massachusetts Correctional Institution  
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*Dear Church Friends,*

My Church

I think that I shall never see, a church that's all it ought to be.

A church whose members never stray,  
beyond the strait and narrow way.

A church that has no empty pews,  
whose pastor never sings the blues.

A church whose deacons always "deek".  
And none are proud and all are meek.

Such perfect churches there may be but none are known to me.

But still we'll work and play and plan to make our own the best we  
can.

*Sincerely,  
Joseph Olson*

*P.S. Our aim should be service, not success.*

*Fear not tomorrow, God's already there.*

*It takes a lot more courage to repent than it does to keep on sinning.*

*A person's faith is not judged by what he says about it,  
but by what he does about it.*

*The family altar would alter many a family.*

In our church we still sing the old, old favorites. When we sing, I've found a friend, oh what a friend! we remember that Jesus wants us to be his friend. When we sing, What a friend we have in Jesus! we feel certain that Jesus has taught us in word and deed, everything that we need to know about God. When we sing, No Longer Strangers, we know that we are chosen and woven into the Lord's community of faith by Love. And, when we sing, I Would Be True, we are reminded that Jesus needs us and that our church friends count on us. . . *to be friend of all the foe and friendless . . . to be giving and to forget the gift . . . but most of all . . . to look up and laugh and love and lift!*

In his last days, Jesus changed up his relationship with his disciples. Shortly after likening himself to the true vine and inviting his followers to abide in him, Jesus stopped calling his disciples servants and started calling them his friends. The name change from servant to friend effectively authorized the disciples of Jesus to be the hands and feet of the Risen Jesus, Christ eternally alive in Word and Deed. The reason that Jesus gave for his decision to transfer his power and authority to his followers was that he had finished telling and showing everything that he knew about God Almighty to them. Today's scripture is a portion of Jesus' farewell speech to his disciples. As part of his final teaching, you'll hear Jesus mention the dynamic themes of love, service, sacrificial self giving, growth in relationship, mutuality, equality, obedience, intimacy, being chosen, command, and joy.

**John 15:9-17**

As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete. "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 friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. You 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. I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another."