

Sermon, Easter 6B, St. David's, 5/5/2024, John 15:9-17 (*Elizabeth Felicetti*)

I have not been with you all in person since we lost our beloved Deacon Bill Jones. Because Bill was so important to the life of the diocese, the diocese will host his funeral at Redeemer instead of here. But I want to take some time this morning to talk about our deacon, here among the people who loved him so well the last 18 years of his life.

I feel affirmed in this given today's Gospel in which Jesus says, "I have called you friends." I cannot think of a verse more suited to our Bill, who called everyone his friend. I remember back when we had three Sunday morning services plus Sunday School hour, rushing back and forth trying to make sure that everything started on time. I would see Bill sitting in his robes talking to people, and gradually I came to realize that what he was doing was more important than what I was doing. I have hurt people's feelings by being abrupt with them because I was focused on what came next. Bill listened to people.

I used to tease him about how he would create a logjam in the greeting line: he usually stood at the back of the church, whereas I stood outside the double doors. I would get annoyed and even call out "logjam!" to him from time to time. He'd laugh. I'm embarrassed to remember that now, as I prepare to step down as rector, and especially now that I can no longer participate in a greeting line for health reasons. I wish I had let people linger a little too long.

After we went to two services and Bill moved into assisted living, I tried his method of sitting out with people before the service. Robert Nelson, whom we lost not long ago, said to me, "I like that you are doing that." I wish I had spent more years remembering that you all are my friends, not people whom I need to direct to get to church on time.

Sometimes Bill used the word "friend" in ways that challenged us. Bill accompanied several men on death row through their executions. Bill told me that after one such execution, on the first Sunday after, he opened his sermon with, "The state executed my friend Friday night." I wonder how the friends in his congregation felt hearing that provocative statement. Bill did not just minister to these murderers on death row: he befriended them. He saw them for the humans they were, facing their deaths, rather than judging them by the worst thing they'd ever done. I admire Deacon Bill's ability to make friends more than I can express.

Today's gospel is part of what some call the "farewell discourse" in the Gospel of John. Jesus is saying these things to his disciples at the last supper. He is not being insular, telling them, "I have called you friends, so huddle together here and remember that." Instead,

after calling them friends instead of servants, he says, “You did not choose me, but I chose you. And I have appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last.”

Friendship with Jesus doesn’t mean we play racquetball with him and go to lunch. We are called to bear fruit: fruit that will last.

Our friend Deacon Bill bore such fruit. Over the eleven years we ministered here together, he performed more marriages than I did, because he had so many friends outside of church who asked him to honor them in that way. He showed us how to be friends to each other. He taught some of us about why the Exsultet in the Great Vigil of Easter is so glorious. He said extra alleluias even when it wasn’t Easter.

He brought people together.

I used to tease Bill about liking *everyone*. In all the years we knew each other, there was only one person I ever heard him say he disliked. This was not true for me. I disliked plenty of people, and plenty of them were people Bill called his friends. One was Gini DiStanislao, now rector of Manakin church and one of my dearest friends. But years ago, Gini and I did not like each other, and most of that is my fault. I remember one clergy meeting when she and I got into a bit of an argument. Afterwards I said to Bill, “So you saw how *your friend* Gini spoke to me?” He responded in his steady drawl, “What I saw was you gave as good as you got.” Bill was so happy when Gini and I became close. She and I will both miss him so much and are sorry that we are not officiating his service together.

My friendship with Gini is a fruit that will last, as are the friendships he facilitated here at St. David’s. But the fruits Bill bore go beyond these personal friendships. Years ago, several of us joined Bill and Lynn when he won a service award from the HomeAgain charity. He advocated for them. He advocated for deacons. He advocated against the death penalty, and Virginia no longer has the death penalty. In 2021 when it was abolished in our state, I immediately contacted Bill and said he must be thrilled. He said that it had been ended before and reinstated before, so he was cautious.

Talking about issues like the death penalty can be fraught in a church, because it’s a political issue, and we avoid political issues here. But deacons are called to serve in the world, to go into prisons and other places that many of us avoid, and regardless of what you think of this issue, I hope you are proud to have known someone like our friend Bill, who was willing to tackle big issues like homelessness and incarceration, while also coming here every Sunday and being our friend.

A little over two years ago, Bill was no longer able to come here on Sundays. For years, he had said to me, “You have to tell me when I shouldn’t be doing this anymore.” We gradually changed things that he did: he stopped setting the table because he got confused. He stopped processing in. Eventually he even stopped reading the Gospel. He still distributed communion. When we reopened in 2021, I started meeting him in the parking lot and walking him in, and someone else would help him put on his vestments.

The last time he said to me “You have to tell me when it’s time for me to step down,” I said, “Bill, I am never going to tell you that. As long as you want to be here, we will have a place for you.”

Then I decided I better share that with the vestry in case they had a different opinion. I remember Jay Phillippi saying, “I love you Elizabeth, but there is something really special about getting communion from Bill.” The rest of the vestry concurred, and I was so grateful. I will miss receiving communion from Bill for the rest of my life. Whenever I took him communion in his assisted living facility, I asked him to also give it to me.

“You did not choose me, but I chose you.” How does that statement from Jesus make you feel? *You* are chosen. You are a friend to Jesus. But this comes with expectations. What fruit will you bear, fruit that will last?