

A Church Called Immanuel

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The New Testament lesson is two passages from the New Testament, first from Luke [7:33-34], the second from John [15:12-15].

In the first, Jesus is reporting what his enemies say about him.

"For John the Baptist has come eating no bread and drinking no wine, and you say, 'He has a demon'; the Son of Humankind has come eating and drinking, and look, you say, 'A glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!'"

In the passage from John is the passage where Jesus speaks to his own disciples shortly before he was arrested and crucified.

"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 a 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."

"The man called 'Immanuel' is God-with-us as our friend. And to be a community that is called 'Immanuel' is to be a community of friends."

The church that we come to organize today would have made it easier for itself, if it had called itself "The Vaughn Road Presbyterian Church" or "The Saint-Something Presbyterian Church." Then it would not have had to keep asking, for years to come, whether the "Immanuel" Presbyterian Church really is the "God-With-Us" church it claims to be. Or, whether it's only a pious social club, or just another organization of do-gooders, or maybe the Republican or Democratic parties at prayer.

But since it is a church that has given itself this name, it is a question that those of you who are members of that church will have to ask yourself over and over again, as long as this church lives. And it's the question I want to ask you today – all of you – as we begin officially the organization of a new church.

What does a truly "God-With-Us" church look like? And, is this church one of them? Is your church one of them?

Well, I only know of one way to answer that question, and that is to look at what the New Testament tells us about Jesus of Nazareth, the only one who ever truly is called "Immanuel." And we have to ask

what a church looks like that's gathered in his name and is shaped by who he was and is and will be. Now, the New Testament talks about Jesus and about the followers of Jesus in many different ways. But today I want to look at the way it talks about it in the two surprising texts I have just read.

In the first that we read, we hear that the respectable, law-abiding, God-believing insiders, contemptuously accuse Jesus of being the friend of tax-collectors and sinners. And in the second passage, Jesus is speaking to his own, beloved disciples on his inner circle, and he says to them that they are his friends. The man called "Immanuel" is God-with-us as our friend. And to be a community that is called "Immanuel" is to be a community of friends. That's what I want to talk about today.

Think first of what it means to discover in Jesus Immanuel that God is our friend, and what it means to be friends of a friendly God. Not all Christians in churches – I'm afraid not even all Presbyterian Christians in churches – know God as their friend.

There are people who believe in a god who is a big, heavenly bully: an all-powerful, sovereign god (in our Presbyterian language), whom if the truth be told, they serve grudgingly because he's bigger and stronger than they, and has absolute dominion and control over their lives, and will get mad at them and turn against them and maybe hurt them, if they don't do what he tells them to.

And there are some other Presbyterians among other Christians who believe in a god who is a great, heavenly bookkeeper: a god who pays off for credit earned and extracts the penalty for payment due; a god whom they serve only because they will be rewarded in this life and in the next if they do, and punished if they don't.

And then there are some people – and there are millions of them in our country – who worship a god who is a great, heavenly granddaddy: a permissive, indulgent god who makes no demands at all, but is there to take care of us, protect us from hardships and pains and the hard knocks of life, to give us all we want to be happy and successful and secure. Those Christians don't serve God, they expect God to serve them. And if he doesn't, they whine and complain that God doesn't love them anymore, or maybe he doesn't even exist.

But the God we come to know in Immanuel is not one of those false gods. The true God is our Friend. You know what friends are. Friends don't dominate and control, friends set us free to be ourselves and to take responsibility for ourselves. Friends are people we can count on to be loyal and stick with us, without fear that they might be for us today and turn against us tomorrow. Friends are people in whose presence we never have to be afraid, people we can look in the eye because we know they are on our side. And friends don't keep a list of favors to be returned and debts to be paid back and grievances to be retaliated for, they are people who help us not because of what we do for them in return for what they have done for us, they help us just because they love us. They don't ask whether we're good enough or have done enough to be their friends. They are people who know all our faults and weaknesses, and love us anyway.

And friends remain our friends, even when we disappoint them or hurt them or betray them, because friends give freely and friends forgive freely, and nothing we could say or do – or not say or do – could keep our friends from being our friends. And friends are not there to give us everything we want, they are there to give us everything we need. They care enough to say 'No,' as well as 'Yes,' to help us to face up to the attitudes and actions by which we destroy ourselves and hurt other people. They are friends not because they enable us to escape trouble, hardship, and pain, but because we can count on them to be there to share all the bad things that happen to us.

That's the kind of God who comes to us in a man called "Immanuel," a God who is our true Friend. And members of a church that is a truly "Immanuel" church demonstrate by what they say and what they do that it's the friendly God, and not some other god, they worship and serve. That means they serve God not like reluctant, resentful slaves, because they must, but as free men and women and children

who serve God because they may. They obey God's commandments not because they are terrified of what God will do to them if they don't, or because they expect God to pay off if they do. They obey out of sheer thanksgiving for God's faithful friendliness toward them. They do not live in the presence of God as petulant, spoiled children, whining and complaining if they don't get their way. They live in the presence of God as friends of the God who promises to walk with them on their way. In joy, yes, but also in sorrow; in success and in failure; in health and in sickness; in life and in death. And the question is, is the church whose birthday we celebrate today, that kind of church?

"In the circle of Jesus' friends that we read about in the New Testament, all the walls that separated people from each other were broken down and broken through."

There's another question. Friends of a friendly God are also friends of one another. Only the community of the friends of God who comes to us in Jesus Immanuel is different from other circles of friends. We're usually attracted to – and make friends with – people who are like us, people with whom we feel comfortable: people of the same race, same social class, same nationality, often of the same sex; people who share our cultural tastes and interests and our likes or dislikes, people who have the same liberal or conservative political views and ethical standards and religious convictions. And on the other hand, we do not associate with people who are different from us. They are either faceless people we don't see at all, or they are our enemies. But the community of the friends of the friendly God we have come to know in Jesus Immanuel is not that kind of community.

In the circle of Jesus' friends that we read about in the New Testament, all the walls that separated people from each other were broken down and broken through. And Jesus was especially the friend – we've learned this in the past several years – Jesus was especially the friend of the poor and oppressed, and the socially unacceptable, and women who had no status and no rights in a patriarchal society; sinners whom the righteous despised and the ungodly whom the true believers despised. He was the friend of all those outsiders, the wrong kind of people.

But that does not mean that Jesus rejected the rich, law-abiding, God-fearing insiders – like most of us Presbyterians! On the contrary, he invited them to become his friends as they were willing to be the friends of his friends; to join the circle that included those people who before they had thought were not good enough to be in their company. And that's what an Immanuel church looks like today. It's a community of kinds of people who in the world outside the church have nothing to do with each other, because they are not like us. The congregation includes people who outside the church fear and hate each other because they are a threat to our security and our way of life. An Immanuel church is a community that includes the excluded, welcomes the stranger, befriends the friendless, empowers the powerless, loves the enemy, forgives the weak and the fallen, accepts the unacceptable, as a wide-open community of friends, in whom all kinds of people are invited and made to feel at home. And the question is, is the church we organize today – is your church – that kind of community?

**"A truly Immanuel, God-with-us church is the friend of the world. The friend
Of the world that a friendly God created and loves and will never abandon,
no matter how far away it may wander or how low it may fall."**

That's still not all. The community of a friendly God is also the friend of the world outside the church. For the God who comes to us in Jesus Immanuel is the God who so loved the world that he gave the Son to reconcile the world to himself.

Now most people outside the church would probably laugh, if we told them we that Christians and our churches look at the world with a friendly eye. They think that we Christians look at the world with sour suspicion and disapproval, reluctant to see anything good out there unless we can take credit for

it. And even then, looking for the manure under the roses. They think that we Christians want to escape the confusion and ugliness and suffering of the world, to tend to our own happiness and security and success. Or they think that we are self-righteous meddlers, who give finger-pointing advice, telling everybody else how they ought to live, whether we do it ourselves or not: people, who whenever we get a chance, try to force everybody else to live like we Christians think they ought to live. There are people who even suspect that people in the church use the name of God only to maintain their own privileged position of wealth and power in the world. In one way or another, outsiders think that we look at the world as our enemy. Have they misunderstood us? Or have they seen what we are all too clearly? In any case, a truly Immanuel church makes it clear by what it says and does that it is a community of the friends of this world.

Now that doesn't mean overlooking the world's sinfulness, telling people what they want to hear, confirming what they already think and want, making them feel good, supporting the liberal or conservative agenda we think might sell best. Friendship with the world is caring enough for the world to expose and confront the false gods of the world that are sure to disappoint and dehumanize people as they dehumanize their fellow human beings. Friendship is caring enough not to let them get by with their worship of money and possessions and sex and military power and national prestige.

But even when an Immanuel church confronts a godless and god-forsaken world with the truth about itself – friendship means telling the world the truth about itself – even then, it proves that it's really a "God-with-us" church by its willingness to stand with and by and for all people – not just fellow Christians – who suffer the consequences of their own or other people's guilt and sinfulness. They do it by gladly supporting non-Christians in the world outside the church who are at work to make this a little more human world. They do it by making clear that when a judgment is spoken against the world, it really is spoken for the sake of the world: to help and to restore and to reconcile and to make new. Not just to threaten, to get even, and squash and wipe out.

And above all, the church proves itself an "Immanuel" church, last but not least, by the way it uses its money and its influence: not just to serve church, but to serve the kingdom of God's justice and compassion and peace, in and for the world. For a truly Immanuel, God-with-us church is the friend of the world. The friend of the world that a friendly God created and loves and will never abandon, no matter how far away it may wander or how low it may fall. And the question is, is the church whose birth we celebrate today – is your church – a community of friends of a friendly God, and therefore, an open community of friends and friends of the world. Is it a church – this church that we form today – a church that lives up to its name?

Well, of course, the only honest answer we can give today – sorry – is...not yet. The mission statement of this church makes it clear that it wants to be the kind of society of friends we've been talking about. And, in fact, it's that mission statement that put me on to the kind of things that I've been trying to say to you today. But it's not yet clear whether this church will actually become what it wants to be. If it depended only on the good intentions of the ministers and members of this church – even on their ability to draw up an impressive mission statement – we might have our doubts.

But it doesn't depend on that.

It depends on the faithfulness of a friendly God, who promises to give the members of this church – of your church – the faith, hope, and love that you cannot give yourself, even with the best of will. But just because we can count on such a God, we may be sure that this new church will be on the way, and will stay on the way, toward becoming what it has named itself, the Immanuel Presbyterian Church: friends of God and friends of all humanity, everyone included, no one excluded.

Amen.