

***Subversive!***  
Sixth Sunday of Easter  
May 6, 2018  
Gordon Wiersma

Text: John 15

Do you know how to say that something is “cool” these days? – it may be a whole other matter as to if you actually know if something is cool or not! – but just assuming that you *would* know, what’s the current cool way to say that something is cool?! – what’s the current hip lingo to use? (here’s a hint: saying “hip lingo” is not cool). Actually, surprisingly, “cool” is still reasonably cool – “cool” has stood the test of time and is still acceptable. But beyond that, I had to do a bit of research, since I’m not up on today’s hip lingo – I asked some of my cool colleagues here at church, and consulted some online compilations of cool terminology (I didn’t ask my kids or any youths, because that would have been too embarrassing for them even to think of me trying to be cool!). But here are a few current cool words: “lit” – ‘that concert was lit’ – how many knew that one? (I wonder if anyone has ever said that one of my sermons was “lit”?) ; “turnt”– that’s T-U-R-N-T – “turnt” – ‘we had such a great time – it was turnt!’ And here’s my favorite “Hundo P” – which is short for 100%! – so if something is really awesome you can say it’s “hundo p” – as in “Pizza Sunday is Hundo P!” - that’s cool!

I’ve always wondered how those phrases get started – who decides what words are cool? – these are the deep mysteries I ponder! But since I’m not sure how it does happen, I’m going to take a bold step and try starting a new cool word myself – right here, right now, May 6, 2018 at Hope Church RCA! - and then you can witness as it spreads through our culture! And here’s the new cool word: “subversive” – except to make it work you have to say it in a cool way: “subversive!” – And the reason I think that this could be the next cool word, is because it’s a word usually used in a negative way, but this is going to turn it around in positive way, but with a kind of an edgy vibe to it. “Subversive” has to do with undermining, opposing, dismantling – to describe someone as subversive usually labels that person as a threat, as destructive. But what I have in mind with this new way to use “subversive”, is for us as people

of faith, as followers of the Risen Christ, as the church, to have a way to express that a certain kind of undermining, opposing, dismantling certain things is actually at the heart of discipleship – a “subversive” that is creative - and that Jesus is the very one who models this “subversive” way for us.

And where I find that is in John 15. The passage we heard today is part of a long section from chapters 14-17 in which Jesus is speaking with his disciples in the time just before his arrest and crucifixion. This long monologue from Jesus is unique to John’s gospel, and it captures something of a ‘last lecture’ spirit in it – as Jesus is sharing his heart with his disciples about what is most important, most essential, for them to live as his followers. Last Sunday Pastor Jill expressed powerfully how Jesus speaks of vine and abiding and asking anything of God – abiding in the teaching of Jesus in such a way that we can ‘demand of God what we will resolve to do, and it will unfold over time’ – I love that! - that’s some good stuff! In today’s passage the abiding continues woven with the theme of love – and then this: “I no longer call you servants, I call you friends” – ‘I no longer call you servants (in the Greek it is SLAVES!), I call you friends (in the Greek it is based on PHILOS – a familial love). And in case you didn’t catch it, this is “subversive” – when Jesus names his followers as friends, something is being undermined, dismantled, upended in a way that creates new possibility – “subversive” – can see how, and why?

When you look at the Gospel of John as a whole, one clear thread throughout is that the gospel describes Jesus Christ with very expansive, mystical, powerful language and images: Jesus is the Word from the beginning through whom all things are created; Jesus is the light, the way, truth, and life; Jesus and the Father are One; John uses “I am” language for Jesus which connects to the Hebrew holy name for God. So when you take this divine description, picture, of who Jesus is – that is what sets up the contrast, the surprise, the “subversive” impact of this passage. John’s Gospel makes it clear that in terms of importance and power and divinity and worship and such –Jesus is HERE (above) and us, and the world HERE (below) - that is how it is and how it should be. But Jesus says something different – Jesus says ‘I call

you friends’ – and suddenly what is ABOVE/OVER is now ALONGSIDE. It is a remarkable thing that Jesus says – hard to find words to express it, which is why it might be best just to say “Subversive!” – since that seems to say it all.

Because what Jesus says here, what Jesus does here – it undermines and opposes and dismantles so much of how our lives and worlds are constructed. Our world wants to make things like this ABOVE/BELOW, TOP/BOTTOM – that is the persistent, insistent, insidious energy by which our world operates: our world, and the world at work in us, wants to find out who is more powerful, who has more, who is approved, who is better, who is important, who is in charge, who is “in”, who is ally, who is enemy, who is worthy, who is worthwhile. But Jesus Christ, the love of God incarnate, says something subversive to such a world and its ways. Jesus says to his followers: “friends” – the One with the ultimate right to claim the place of ABOVE, comes alongside – God in Christ enters into life to create a space for true life. What this subversive word from Jesus leads to in us is what we need to get to next – but I think that first we need just to pause here, one could say, abide here, and take this in; because what’s next is important, but this right here – Jesus from ABOVE to ALONGSIDE – it is the whole thing; it is the revelation, the gift, the conversion, the “subversive” truth which is the only thing that can sustain what comes next. So, abide in this: The eternal God, the “I Am”, revealed to us in Christ, God with us – this Jesus says (*move from ABOVE to ALONGSIDE*) : “I call you friends” – “subversive!”

And what comes next is how “subversive” abides in and is lived out in us - what’s next is what Jesus speaks of throughout this passage: ‘love others as I have loved you; I have appointed you to bear good fruit; abide in my love that you may love one another’. And now how we hear all of that - loving each other and others and bearing fruit - is that our lives are called to express this subversive thing that Jesus has done: dismantling OVER into ALONGSIDE. I wonder if you and I can picture what that looks like – I wonder if it sounds possible – I wonder if it sounds important...with all that is going on in our lives and our world, is this really something important, powerful, fruitful for us to pay attention to?...from OVER to

ALONGSIDE? Well, Jesus says it is -- but I think in order for us to grasp the power and importance of this, I first need point out a couple of sobering realities that we need to realize about ourselves.

The first thing is this – for us to come to grips with the reality that we are all very, very, deeply immersed in the life paradigm of OVER/UNDER – we are deeply immersed in hierarchy, rivalry, control, power over, force – we are so immersed in it that it appears to be just the way it is, the way it has to be. In ways great and small, in our relationships, our politics, our economics, our spirituality, the very air we breathe is that there is a TOP and a BOTTOM, winners and losers. It is an act of great faith – an act of great will – an act of great rebellion – it is, in a word, “subversive” to consider this stunning truth: perhaps this is not the only way things can be...which might even lead to the subversive idea that this is not how things were made to be, or even have to be.

The second thing is more sobering yet – which is that we are all not only immersed in OVER/UNDER, we are also a part of carrying it out – a part of the problem, of the OVER – of entrenching and perpetuating that way of living, a way which is not life-giving. It’s something for us to acknowledge, confess, in many ways – in individual ways in relationships and in broad ways corporately, we perpetuate OVER – and I think we have a particular responsibility to face that we also do this in our faith. Part of the shame of Christianity is that it has many times been complicit in wielding power over people in ways that have been harmful, diminishing, deadly – that it has been a faith that has held onto power and treasured its own stature. For us as Christians in this country, part of what we are coming to grips with is a history in which many parts of the church were too often silent in the face of racial discrimination and violence, and too slow to join in efforts to dismantle it - a pattern for our faith that has too often been comfortable in its privilege while others dwelled in places UNDER/BELOW – it is a legacy that still haunts us, that still leaves a destructive wake, and that still calls us to choose a different present and future.

The present and future that calls us is the voice of Jesus. We can say we believe *in* Jesus, but do we believe what Jesus says? – do we believe the subversive truth that names us as friends of God and calls us to carry out a life WITH/ALONGSIDE rather than over, or under, others? Do we believe our faith is a challenge to the powers of this world, that our identity is undermining and unravelling the power of OVER rather than participating in it? When we look at one another, and our neighbors, and our world – at our politics and economy and community- does the subversive claim of Jesus shape our vision and action? – do we dare to entertain a different vision than OVER/UNDER? We need to have the spiritual power of what Jesus says to us abide in us to sustain us: ‘I call you FRIENDS’ – that blessing of Jesus coming alongside us is the sustenance of a subversive life! – do not concede to the OVER/UNDER paradigm of this world; do not concede to your privilege; do not conceded to your oppression; do not concede to the way things are...instead, as Pastor Jill offered for us to hear from Jesus: ‘demand of God what we will resolve to do, and it will unfold over time.’ We demand of God to be sustained by the Spirit of the One who calls us “friends”, that we may resolve to share such a love in our lives, that what may unfold is the transformation from OVER/UNDER to WITH/ALONGSIDE. We resolve to live in such a way that bears the fruit of God’s reign – friends to God and to one another and to this earth, woven together in love; the kind of faith that dismantles the ways of death with the Spirit of life – the kind of life which people might see and say: “subversive” – thanks be to God. AMEN.