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 The First Congregational Church of Old Lyme
 Texts: Psalm 102; John 15: 12-17
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I Call You Friends

*Friendship is born at that moment when one person says to another, "What! You too? I thought I was the only one."
 - C. S. Lewis*

Many of us have seen the footage out of Afghanistan these past grueling weeks, the flood of refugees, takeover by the Taliban, and the tens of thousands of recent arrivals being held at US army bases awaiting transfer to other cities across the nation.

On Friday, I attended a Zoom session led by IRIS (Integrated Refugee and Immigration Service) in New Haven about the latest news on when the Afghan refugees are coming to CT. It's been changing daily but the latest information is sometime in the next two -three weeks, they tell us, the initial group of 300 refugees will be arriving in our state. Our church, all of YOU, have welcomed many refugees and new friends over the years in this relationship with IRIS. As Community Co-sponsors with area churches, we are now among those communities preparing to receive a family. Apparently, the need far exceeds placements because there are so many thousands of people waiting.

This imminent reality became quite real for me when I shared a phone call with an Afghani American by the name of Dr. Tabibi, who is a treasured friend of my extended family. Dr. Tabibi and my Uncle Peter are the stars of this very human story I'll share in a moment.

The background noise on Dr. Tabibi's end of the call was so intense, I found it difficult to hear his voice above the cacophonous roar of cargo planes taking off and landing every few seconds from the Virginia air force base where he and his family now live. Those planes are carrying newly evacuated Afghan refugees in search of safe harbor.

I thought of our scripture today from the gospel of John, taken from what's known as the Farewell Discourses, where Jesus tells the disciples, just before his arrest, to "*I call you friends. There is nothing greater than laying down one's life for one's friends.*" (Jn 15:13)

When I think about what we are called to do at this moment in time as a community, as a church, as people on the planet, I think about this story of friendship that I've known since childhood. It spans 6 decades.

It all began in Afghanistan. In the hallways of a preparatory high school in Kabul, where two young teachers sipped strong coffee and graded student papers. It's the early 60's, my Uncle Peter was there as a Peace Corps volunteer teaching English and his new friend, Baghar Tabibi, was a math and science wizard. The Tabibi's home, with their platters of steaming rice and

chicken kabobs, became a refuge for my uncle far away from his roots in Boston. He'd quit law school to see the world before resuming his studies.

Fast forward to the early 1980's, many years had passed since the friends had seen each other. Both now had growing families. Dr. Tabibi had received his PhD in Physics and my uncle was now a Federal judge for the Coast Guard. Afghanistan was embroiled in a war with the Soviets and the country became too dangerous for academics and scientists.

Unbeknownst to my uncle, the Tabibis had to flee Afghanistan under threat of death. Mrs. Tabibi had been jailed and tortured for 35 days. And thankfully, one night they paid off a guard and bravely escaped over the border to Iran. Unfortunately, Iran had recently undergone a revolution and Ayatollah Khomeini closed all universities. It wasn't safe there either and their long escape efforts continued painfully.

Through tears, my uncle recently told me about the letter he'd received one day with an Iranian postmark. In a last-ditch effort, Dr. Tabibi had written to his American friend, "*We need your help, they're coming after me. Can you help us?*"

As is the case for most refugees around the world seeking political asylum, the wait is endless punctuated by terror and uncertainty every step of the way.

It took my Uncle Peter a year to arrange for the Tabibi's political asylum to America and this beloved family feared for their lives up until the very last second. It took persistence and many dead ends but eventually, through help from a catholic diocese in Richmond, a Bishop got involved and then a Senator. Listening to the story, I marvel at all the hands, all the people, all the determination involved in the saving of this one family.

Finally, one fine October day, word of their arrival came! The Tabibis arrived at JFK airport carrying a toddler and a two-month-old infant, one small bag of belongings and \$100.00 cash- everything they had to their name.

For many months afterwards, they slept on my relative's yellow couch making a way with their friends out of no way.

It took a while, but with his academic credentials, Dr Tabibi was soon offered a prestigious position at NASA where he did research for a decade and then settled into a life of research and teaching at a local university. Mrs. Tabibi raised their three daughters, opened her own business and imported Afghan jewelry.

In the past decades, hundreds of Afghans have found safety and a home here near the Tabibi's. And I learned recently that most called my favorite Uncle "Uncle Peter", too!

As the Persian poet wrote, "*Be a lamp, a lifeboat, walk out of your house like a shepherd. Help someone's soul to heal.*"

These days, the brothers in friendship are healthy octogenarians, sharing their creaks and aches, affection and tears which surface easily between them. As grandfathers and mentors, they nurture the dreams of those younger ones on their family and friendship tree.

“I call you friends”, Jesus said. “Love one another. There is nothing greater than laying down one's life for one's friends.”

As our church awaits an Afghan family, I wonder about this gospel wisdom and how we are called to show up for one another as a matter of faith and friendship. I wonder about the friendships, new and seasoned, that you cherish in your lives and those that keep us growing and alive as a community.

As I walked with this passage this week, I had a moment of revelation. It was startling to me to really ponder Jesus' command, that the summons to love is lived out in embodied friendship. That's the core of our faith. What Jesus is teaching us here is that loving one another MEANS befriending one another, means showing up. It's about deep commitment, sometimes it's costly, inconvenient and involves self-sacrifice. And there are also many moments of deep joy and celebration.

In John's gospel, friendship is the ultimate form of relationship with God, one another and community. That is, it! In the New Testament a “friend” is understood as “one who loves”, *phileo*, in the Greek- and the highest form of love. This ancient ideal of friendship was rooted in the common good. In many ways, reading the poetic gospel of John (written generations after Jesus' death), we notice that throughout Jesus' whole life, love is incarnated, made visible through the bonds of life-saving relationships. It's this quality of life-giving friendship that we are invited to enact ourselves.

In the book, *Radical Friendship*, Kate Johnson, describes friendship as the “activity of showing up for one another's freedom. Even in an unjust world. Even across difference. Even after generations and generations of harm.”¹

Showing up for one another's freedom... This essential activity of friendship is rooted in love and trust and is the base unit of relationship” within families, communities and larger societal structures. By showing up for each other, by our very presence--our befriending, these radical acts of extending friendship, risking new relationships also help us “to build social movements, transform oppressive power, recover from losses, repair wounds and share joy...” in spite of all the challenges that surround us. Don't we see that here in all the life we're engaged in beyond these pews and front doors.

This higher call is in marked contrast to our superficial, consumerist culture, often addicted to stories about romance, celebrity, and money - not the friendships that give our lives sustenance and meaning.

We are called to be friends to make a way out of no way for one another. We are called to reach beyond where we think we can ever go.

¹ Kate Johnson, *Radical Friendship*. (Shamabala Publications, Inc), 2021.

We are called to acts of love, living out the gospel mandate, *Love one another*.

Next month, the Tabibi's with my aunt and uncle are throwing an anniversary party, celebrating their arrival in the US forty years ago and the decades of friendship between them with plates of food, lots of dancing and probably masking. But eyes will be shining I'm sure. Shining with affection, gratitude and hope for all that has unfolded and all that is yet to be.

A gospel story writ large...