

May 6, Easter 6B (John 15:9-17)

Sometimes the life of abundant love is lonely.

by [Catherine Faith MacLean](#) in the [April 11, 2018](#) issue

“Remote but not isolated” is how we described our former home. Yellowknife, capital of the Northwest Territories, is about 250 miles south of the Arctic Circle. The city is perched on the edge of a lake, which in winter can be crossed on an ice road to reach the nearest neighboring village. In midwinter there is weak sunlight from 10 till 2. For the other 20 hours, northern lights frolic in curtains of color across the entire, dark sky. Caribou range close enough to town that workers can hunt on their lunch break. Even with a bridge over the river, when ice is forming in fall or dissolving in spring, minimal trucking means high grocery prices. It’s remote.

From the first chapter of John’s Gospel, the disciples follow Jesus. They are out on the road with him, witnessing miracles and listening to teachings, feeding thousands and seeing him walk on water. They are set apart to live the weirdest daily lives since Elijah. And they are separated from parents and families: their dear ones exist remotely from the disciples’ place and daily endeavor, from conversation about what matters and what they are seeking.

There are days coming when Jesus will be remote to them. Not stand-offish or emotionally distant but literally absent and unavailable. The life of abundant love will become lonely, and the disciples will be vulnerable. Friends found will be the lifeline—friends called, actually, not so much found: “You did not choose me but I chose you.”

The early listeners to John’s story of love were disenfranchised, too: working out faith without synagogue, community without tradition. Were their dear ones remote? Was John writing for people who were lonely for siblings and cousins? Did they long for the old days of familiar nudges and shared innuendo and someone who knew how the childhood stories finished?

“You are my friends,” Jesus says to the disciples. In the long telling that reveals love in John’s Gospel, this chapter brings us the only occasion when Jesus says this. “I do

not call you servants any longer,” he goes on, “but I have called you friends.”

Friendship is our second circle of kin. Friends fill in for family when family is lost. When we are distant by geography, when we are shunned for who we are, when we are up to our ears in work that family cannot understand—friends fill in. They shorten the distance to the heart; they embrace the authentic; they hold the baby; they listen. And they love.

The disciples do this. The early listeners to John’s story did it. They filled in; they kept the love alive. They loved one another as Jesus loved them. They held onto this commandment from what we call Jesus’ farewell discourse, given one world-disrupting evening.

It’s up to us to teach this commandment of love in a world that needs more disrupting. In Canada, many of us are currently disrupting our assumptions and changing our perspectives in acknowledgment of First Nations people and the treaties of which we are all a part. Change is happening in Canadian government, universities, and churches. We are turning things around. The clincher is relationships: How do we bridge the isolation we have from one another?

Last summer 24 Indigenous and non-Indigenous teenagers paddled, camped, and cooked together for two weeks along Lake Superior. This wilderness experience encouraged relationships with one other and the land. Three large voyageur canoes held the 24 young people, the outfitters, and the elders. *Gibimishkaadimin*, it was called, an Anishinaabemowin word representing “paddling together by boat.” I am aware that when I am in challenging encounters, it is not my most pleasant self that comes forward, and I respect the difficulties these young people took on.

When I hosted some of them on their way home from Lake Superior, I learned that the event was a church response to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, which calls us to comply with and implement the principles of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. Going somewhere remote with complete strangers and doing difficult things with them, like learning to paddle a huge canoe on stormy water, isn’t a walk in the park. Neither is it a test. It’s deep living. It’s life in faith: remote but not isolated. Remote because it isn’t home, but not isolated because there are friends present to fill in.

This life in faith is an adventure. We end up called to places we’ve never dreamed of living, spending time with people we’ve never wanted to be in the same room with,

loving the land down to its geological roots, finding our hearts broken and our hope rising nonetheless. We rally for the remotest of possibilities: that people will love each other, that community is worth it, that difference is a happy blessing, that every relationship we attempt has value. Through joy and a commitment to loving one another, we subvert isolation. Love is a choice we make, time and again. Following the disciples and John's early listeners, we fill in where Jesus is needed. We keep the love alive.

One January back in Yellowknife, in 24-hour darkness and a temperature of 40 degrees below zero, we brought our newborn daughter home from the hospital. Northern lights curled and unfurled across the whole sky: green, white, red. We walked into the house, and the power went out. Remote but not isolated, we lit a fire in the woodstove and invited friends over.