

## “Friendship”

I John 5: 1-6, John 15: 9-17

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Good friends are truly one of life's great treasures. To have a friend is to have someone to turn to, no matter what, someone to confide in, someone to trust and rely on. Real friends give of themselves without any thought of what they may get in return. Friends are not manipulative nor do they hold a grudge (at least, not for very long.) They are neither judgmental nor conditional. Some people have said that you can count your true friends on one hand. I am not sure I agree with that entirely, however, I do agree that real friends, friends with whom you can entrust your very life, are indeed one of life's greatest treasures.

In John's gospel, Jesus tells his disciples many times and in many ways how much he loves them. He now commands them to love each other as he has loved them. However, in this week's gospel reading Jesus complicates matters by calling his disciples friends. This gospel reading is from Jesus' farewell discourse. His mission is to prepare his disciples, as best as he is able, for his ultimate departure. Jesus knows the struggles they will face without him. They will need to rely on each other, trust each other, look out for each other, admonish each other, and forgive each other. In other words, they will need to be more than a group of people who love and follow Jesus. They will need to think of each other as friends. They will need to love each other as much and as well as Jesus has loved them.

Kris Lewis says “Jesus calls his disciples friends and in doing so, he upsets the usual teacher pupil relationship, he breaks boundaries, and he brings a new dimension to the bond he has with his disciples. No longer are they master and servant. Rather they are ‘friends’ with all that entails.” Friendship in the first century Mediterranean world was a serious matter. To be considered a friend was to be in a position of honor. Being a friend meant being treated like one of the family, as “kin” with all the obligations that follow. To be a friend meant looking out for the welfare of the other, to put the other's needs on an equal footing with one's own. Friendship meant you could count on that person to return that level of concern and care.

I am not sure Jesus' disciples understood what they were getting themselves into when Jesus called them friends. I am not sure we understand any

better. Until now, the disciples have related to Jesus more like a child relates to a parent—questioning, seeking approval, expecting to be cared for. Children understand friendship differently. To their immature mind, friendship is a much less complicated affair. You may have noticed there is a “tit for tat” quality to their friendships—“I’ll be your friend as long as you’re nice to me.” A child often switches “best friends” freely and frequently. Sometimes a friend is simply someone who is willing to play with them. I have observed this with my own children. If they meet someone even briefly, whether at school or at camp or in an after school program, they may quickly consider that person a “friend.”

We see this sort of immaturity in the way the disciples relate to Jesus. They continue to worry if Jesus will care for them, wondering what was in it for them. Jesus realizes that his time with them is short and he desperately needs them to “get it.” It is always frustrating when the people we care for don’t seem to mature or make those leaps of understanding as quickly as we would hope. It will take more than Jesus calling them “friends” for them to make that leap. However, by calling them friends Jesus hopes they will expand the way they understand their relationship with him and through him, their relationship with God. Not only does Jesus love them as a parent loves a child—without reservation, without expectation for anything in return, but he also loves them as friends. He does not treat them as children or servants, but friends who will soon know that they can not only rely on each other and trust one another in and through the most difficult moments.

We too can call Jesus friend. I know that may not be how many of you think of Jesus. However, what a difference it might make if we thought more often of Jesus as friend. We sang it well when we were children, “what a friend we have in Jesus, all our sins and troubles bear.” “Instead of diminishing our relationship with Jesus,” Kris Lewis says, “the notion of friendship with the divine elevates and expands it. To be a true friend is to care about someone’s hurts and pains without regard to the cost of oneself, without regard for any possible return on the investment. And there is no question that Jesus does that for us.” What’s more, to think of Jesus as friend means that we can find Jesus in our human friendships. We can see the face of Jesus in the face of those who care for us. We can catch a glimpse of the beloved community in our most common and mundane encounters with friends.

What Jesus asks of his friends is exceedingly difficult. He commands us to

love one another as he has loved us. The “one another” of which he speaks is not just the people in this church or in our community. It is anyone who follows Jesus, who considers him or herself a friend of Jesus. That includes a whole lot of people we might never think to call friend. Today we often find ourselves on different sides of issues, perhaps arguing as “friends of Jesus,” without regard for the effect this has on each other. We freely employ manipulative tactics if we don’t get our own way. I am sure you have heard someone say something like, “If you pass that resolution, our church will be forced to leave the conference,” or “Pastor, if march against the war I might be forced to go to another church.” This is no way to treat friends.

We do not always agree with our friends. We do not always vote the same way, support the same resolutions, or even believe the same things to be true. However, if we are truly friends, we endure these differences. In the long run, those things don’t matter nearly as much when we know we are loved. When we trust that we can count on that person in our time of need, that they will comfort us when we grieve, or rejoice with us when it is time to celebrate. After all, this is what true friendship entails.

Those first disciples were not friends. They may not have known each other were it not for Jesus. They were a rag-tag group of people whom Jesus loved. It was because Jesus first loved them that they would come to love him and later each other. Is the same not also true of us? Most of us here this morning, would never know each other except for our commitment to Jesus. A friend may have initially invited us to come to church, but once here, our friendship with Jesus lead us to develop new friendships with each other. It is not a stretch to now consider the person sitting next to you a friend. However, it does not stop there. We are not just friends with people who attend South Church, we are friends with everyone who also considers themselves a friend of Jesus. This friendship stretches across denominational lines. It goes beyond the label we use to separate us –conservative and liberal, evangelical and mainline, Episcopalian or United Church of Christ. Regardless, we are all friends of Jesus, called to love one another, care for one another, listen to one another, honor one another, abide with one another, whether or not we agree with one another.

Dr. Peter Storey, a great spiritual leader in South Africa who worked along with Archbishop Desmond Tutu and President Nelson Mandela in dismantling apartheid, says that when we invite Christ into our lives, he

insists that we let him bring his friends with him. Jesus insists that we cannot truly love him and not also love those he loves and those for whom he died. In fact, we must love even those we do not and cannot like, for Christ's sake. As political, ideological, military and religious conflicts increase around the world, we will not survive if we do not learn to love all our brothers and sisters in Christ.

Jesus calls us friends trusting that this will change the way we live. We are not simply believers seeking to do God's will, striving individually to live good and righteous lives. When we come together in this place, we are the body of Christ. Dietrich Bonhoeffer the revered German martyr who was killed resisting Hitler's third Reich in 1945 described the church as "Christ taking form in a body of believers." The church therefore, is not so much an institution with rules, regulations, and rituals as it is an intricate body of relationships. More than any organization, the church is an organism—made up of people who love God, seeking to do God's will, who love and cherish each other. We are willing to treat others with dignity and honesty, gladly caring for each other's needs, and learning to build bridges of understanding and peace. We are unafraid to hold one another accountable, to speak the truth in love, to make choices that may seem arbitrary to some or even dare we say "unchristian." That is what Jesus hoped for when he boldly called his disciples friend. Even in our darkest moments, we never stop loving each other, caring for each other, comforting each other, supporting each other to be the people God would have us be and not simply who we would like us to be.

I want to tell you about a moment in the life of the United Church of Christ recently when this notion of Christian friendship was modeled in an amazingly powerful way. I did not witness it myself, but heard about it after the fact, and was moved to tears. This past summer, at the General Synod meeting in Atlanta, the gathered body deliberated about many important things. One of the most newsworthy was the resolution to brought before the church to declare the United Church of Christ in support of marriage equality. Two resolutions were presented. Much thoughtful discussion, editing, and prayerful reflection ensued. After the resolution passed, a penetrating silence fell upon the body of Christ gathered in that huge auditorium. As a witness to the power of Christian love and friendship, the General Minister and President, Rev. John Thomas offered this prayer,

*"Lord Jesus, to you we live, to you we suffer, to you we die. Yours will we be*

*in life and in death. Today, as in ancient Bethlehem, the hopes and fears of all the years are met in you. We give thanks for your presence during these days of prayer and discernment, and especially for your presence here this morning. We have felt your warm embrace, stilling us as we tremble with joy, with hope, with fear, with disappointment. Remind us that as we are tempted to run from each other, so too we run from you. We know that every choice confers a cost, so let us attend in the coming hours and days to those for whom this decision confers a particular burden. Let us find words that comfort rather than congratulate; let us seek to be a community of grace and forgiveness rather than organizing constituencies of protest, let us use our hands not to clap, but to wipe away every tear. And in all this may we know in surprising new ways the comfort of belonging to You. This is our prayer. Hear us, Lord Jesus. Amen.*

His words offer testimony to what it means to call one another Friend. This is what Jesus hoped for when he gathered those first disciples and promised to love them. This is what he hopes for when he commands us to love each other as he has loved us. This is the way friends treat friends. I no longer call you servants, say Jesus, instead I call you friends. Our greatest challenge and deepest calling is to live as Christ's friends. May it always be so! Amen