

Sixth Sunday of Easter May 5 2024

John 15:9-17

Think of your best friend. Got them? That person who you could call at 3 am to get you out of the ditch and they would show up? That person who gets you. Who, as *Grey's Anatomy* put it, is your person.

Think about the fullness of what that word, friend, means to you.

Jesus calls his disciples, us, friends in our text from John today. We have a particular way of thinking about this word, but what did it mean to Jesus and those in Palestine in the first century? One historian said "Friends, like kin, could be called upon in any emergency; they could be expected to display solidarity, lend general support. One's circle of friends probably exerted even more influence on one's behavior and outlook than one's kin. Friends were supposed to be alike: a friend was ideally conceived of as one's 'other self'."

Another said friend in the ancient world "captures the love, the joy, the deep mutuality of the relationship into which Christ invites us. The Greeks believed that true friends are willing to die for each other. This is the mutual love of Christian community commanded by Christ and enabled by the Spirit."

At least in John's telling, Jesus' criteria for what makes a friend a friend is three-fold. Jesus' friends are those who love one another. His friends are not merely servants (although we do serve him) because he does not leave us in the dark. Rather, he shares what he knows from the Father. Jesus' friends have knowledge from him. And, finally to be Jesus' friend means that he chose us to be this.

Think back to that best friend. Did you choose them, or did they choose you? Did they just kind of sidle up to your life and plant themselves there? And if so, what does that feel like? To have someone choose you to be their person? Pretty special, isn't it?

This is what happens to us when God come to us in Jesus. "You did not choose me," Jesus says, "I chose you." God's love claims us as friend in the waters of baptism like Hattie Ruth will experience today. Or in the breath of the Holy Spirit on our cheek calling us into relationship. What Jesus describes is what Sallie McFague in her book *Models of God*, says is the very essence of who God is. Especially as God chooses to enter into a relationship of friendship with Israel.

We have had the image of Jesus as the Good Shepherd. It is echoed in this image of Jesus as friend in that both will lay down their lives for the other. Perhaps the image of friend moves that

idea from the literal (although it doesn't preclude that) to a more figurative. Friends will lay down their own lives, their own interests, to respond. Friends lay down their sleep to help the friend in the ditch. Lay down their plans to go comfort a friend. Lay down their needs and wants to help their friend. Jesus as friend has done both for us. Laid down his life on the cross so that we might truly live. And laid down his life, to come and attend to us friends in need. To show us the way to life that truly is life.

Jesus as friend says he has appointed us to bear fruit in the world. This is that image last week of Jesus as the True Vine. For it is only when we are intimately connected with Jesus, receive that love of God come to us in Jesus regularly, that we can truly bear that good fruit.

Jesus as friend has shared everything he knows of God. Who God is (God is love come to us without condition), what God calls us to bear into the world (love one another without condition).

And in this image, there is a call to be that which Jesus says he is. To be friend to one another. As one author put it, "Then and now, friendship with Jesus brings followers into a relationship of reciprocal love, creating a community in which people who addressed each other as "friends" could realize the ideal of

mutual self-sacrifice (15:12-14).” Jesus calls us into that communal self-sacrificial relationship that is the reign of God.

As another author put it, “It is not simply that Jesus will advance his mission through a web of interpersonal relationships. Weaving a web of relationships is the point of the whole enterprise.” Jesus has come to show us that we are bound together by cords that cannot be broken.

But this is not some task of drudgery. Instead, Jesus calls us to these things so that his joy may be in us, and our joy may be filled to the brim. The word joy in Greek is rooted in the word for grace. That undeserved favor, attention, love, friendship give to us by God. In this way, joy is deeper than mere happiness. Another author defined joy as- the indescribable sense when you find yourself experiencing abundant grace.

The grace of your friend showing up for you. Choosing you. The grace of God’s love showing up in Jesus. Healing your pain. Strengthening your weakness. Encouraging your giftedness. Choosing you and naming you beloved of God.

And in the joy of that relationship, we bear the fruit of that love for others. Why? Because it is what the church teaches? What God expects? Perhaps.

But I wonder if that goes far enough. One author points out that so often what God in Jesus calls us to is not the values and ways of life of the rest of the world. And so, people ask, "Why do you do that?" and our answer is, "Because I am a friend of Jesus." Beginning there, we start at the heart: The heart of our relationship with Jesus and the heart of what Jesus desires for all people. To be chosen. Friendened. Loved without condition.

What a simple and joyful answer. Why do you do that? Because I am a friend of Jesus. Why do you feed the hungry? Because I am a friend of Jesus. Why do you love those who put you down? Because I am a friend of Jesus.

And in this friend, who has chosen us. We find all that we could ever need. A shoulder to cry on. A sympathetic ear. The encourager who gives us confidence, courage, grit to see and use the wonderful gifts and abilities God has given to us. The voice of truth that calls us to see hard realities. The wisdom of his Word. The Bath that washes the old self away. The Meal of his own Body and Blood that satisfies and strengthens us.

So that we might go into the world and do the same for others. And to have the joy of, when asked why we do these things, responding, "Because, I am a friend of Jesus."