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First Presbyterian Church, Kissimmee, Florida
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“Friends”

John 15:9-17 (NRSV)

[9] As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. [10] If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. [11] I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.

[12] "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. [13] No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. [14] You are my friends if you do what I command you.

[15] I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father.

[16] You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. [17] I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.

FRIENDS OF THE KING

In the Old Testament a select few leaders had a special relationship with God. Abraham was known as God's friend.

It was said that the Lord would speak to Moses face to face as a man speaks to a friend.

But, these relationships were the exception rather than the rule. Most of God's people couldn't claim God as their friend. God was holy and wholly. There was always a sense of fear and judgment when it came to the presence of God

But, this perception changed when Jesus came. Jesus told his disciples (and I believe he tells us too) "I have called you friends." This is one of the great statements of faith in the Bible. In Jesus we have a friend. The friendship of God is revealed in Jesus. God has revealed Himself to be a friend to all His people.

Friendship is the ultimate expression of love. To be chosen as a friend by anyone is a high honor. To be chosen as a friend by Jesus is an even greater honor and joy. The Bible tells us that this is true. The King of kings and the Lord of lords is also our friend.

William Barclay talks about a custom in the ancient world that sheds some light on what it means to be a friend of God. There was a very select group of men who were called the friends of the king.

This elite group had access to the king at all times. They even had the right to come into his bedroom at the beginning of the day. The king talked to this select group even before he talked with his generals or his statesmen.

And when Jesus called his disciples friends, he gave them (and us) the same privilege. We have access to God through Christ.

We have the right to come to Him at any time. As Joseph Scriven put it in the hymn, "What a Friend We Have in Jesus,"

"What a friend we have in Jesus, all our sins and griefs to bear! What a privilege to carry everything to God in prayer."

But, as the hymn writer noted quite often we don't take advantage of that privilege. We often forfeit the peace that could be ours. We often bear needless pain all because we do not take it to the Lord in prayer. We do not take advantage of the fact that Jesus is our friend.

So I want us to think more deeply this morning about what it means to have Jesus as our friend. Jesus does not turn any of us away. He is always with us and for us. In Jesus we have a friend who knows us and loves us with no strings attached

A FRIEND KNOWS

Often a good friend knows us better than we know ourselves. A friend understands the struggles and joys of our life and a friend is able to sympathize with us in a way that no one else can. Our friends can laugh when we laugh and cry when we cry because they have empathy for us.

In an even greater way this applies to Jesus. The great message of the Bible is that God knows us by name. We are important to God. When there is no one around who can understand the troubles of our life, God is there. The Bible tells us that the Spirit of God in Christ intercedes for us, and comforts us in "sighs too deep for words." (Romans 8:26)

In short Jesus loves us. Jesus is a flesh and blood example of what God's love looks like. And according to the apostle Paul in his letter to the Romans, nothing can separate us from that love. Paul said, "... neither death nor life ... nor anything in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Nothing in all creation can separate us from God's love, not even our sin can separate us from God's love. The Bible tells us that while we were still sinners Christ died for us. This is what Jesus is talking about when he said in our lesson for today, "Greater love has no one than this that one lay down his life for his friends." (John 15:13) Jesus died for our sins on the cross of Calvary.

A FRIEND FORGIVES

Fair weather friends are not friends at all. But, Jesus is not a fair weather friend. At the heart of God's friendship as revealed in Jesus is a willingness to stick with us through thick and thin. At the heart of God's friendship is a willingness to forgive and forget our sins.

I saw a poster once that read, "A friend is somebody with whom you can risk being yourself." Isn't that so true?

I am so grateful for those people with whom I can risk being totally honest. And yet this is only possible when I know that they will not judge me harshly. Even though I often make many mistakes my true friends are willing to accept me "warts and all."

When Jesus called his disciples friends, he promised to be with them through thick and thin and to love them "warts and all."

And the disciples had quite a few warts. The disciples did many things that were hurtful to Jesus. They misunderstood his teaching and sought their own glory instead of his. They deserted Jesus in his hour of need. Peter even denied knowing Jesus.

But, the friendship of Jesus was not defeated by unfaithfulness and failure. Jesus did not judge his friends harshly. Instead, after the resurrection Jesus came to his broken friends on more than one occasion and offered them forgiveness and hope.

The gospel of John ends with a story about Jesus reaching out to Peter, the disciple who denied Jesus three times. Three times Jesus asked Peter, "Do you love me?" And three times Peter affirmed his love. I think that this was Jesus' way to make forgiveness real and make Peter whole again.

And I think that Jesus still seeks out those disciples who have failed Him in some significant way. Jesus does this because he is our one true friend who is not content to leave us in our bed of sin.

An old hymn bids us come to Jesus “Just as I am without one plea but that thy blood was shed for me.” Because Jesus is our friend this is possible. We can come to Him just as we are. We don’t have to pretend to be something that we’re not. God in Christ loves us with no strings attached.

A FRIEND STANDS BESIDE US

A friend does not stand over us and command us to do something nor does a friend stand under us waiting to receive a command. A friend stands beside us in good times and bad. A friend understands because a friend is on our level.

Now it may seem difficult to apply this aspect of friendship when it comes to Jesus. In one sense Jesus is not our equal. According to the Bible Jesus is the Son of God. He is the sinless one, an example of what it means to be perfect and holy.

But, the Bible tells us that Jesus chose to become our equal. In Paul’s letter to the Philippians we read that though Jesus was in very nature God “he emptied himself, taking on the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.”

In Jesus, God chose to put Himself on an equal footing with us. God chose to put His very nature into the world of flesh and blood.

It is hard to imagine a God who loves us so much that He would make His Son one of us. This is what many people of other religions find so hard to accept about Christianity. They find this core belief to be totally at odds with their ideas about God. God can be many things, but never a friend. That title is too close and too personal.

But, according to the Bible this is exactly what happened with Jesus. Because Jesus was one with us, we know that God understands us. God has been there. In the book of Hebrews we read that in Jesus the great high priest “we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are ... “

It is of great comfort to me to know that in Jesus God has come down to our level. God knows the struggle of temptation, the pain of living as a mortal and the frustration of failure. Because Jesus came, because the Word became flesh I know that God stands beside me, a friend who understands.

A FRIEND CHANGES US

Really good friends make us into better people by the power of their love. The love, support and forgiveness of a good friend has the power to change us in dramatic ways.

Think about how the love and forgiveness of Jesus changed those first disciples. Twice in our passage for today Jesus commands his disciples to “love each other.” (John 15:12, 17)

How could Jesus command something like this? It is clear in all the gospels that those first disciples were just like us. They were cowardly, small minded, slow to learn, greedy, power hungry, and self serving.

In short they were not to be trusted.

And yet in this farewell discourse Jesus does trust them. When Jesus tells them to love one another as he has loved them, Jesus is making these first disciples responsible for passing on the love of God as revealed in the Son.

Think about it. If those first disciples had not loved each other, if love had not been the hallmark of the early Christian community no one would have ever cared about life and death of Jesus. And we would not be here this morning.

But, the Spirit of the risen Christ, the Spirit of love invaded those first disciples and changed them in mighty ways. Disciples who had been cowardly and deceptive boldly told the truth with courage. Disciples who had been selfish and self-centered sold everything they had for the greater good of the community.

Those first disciples did love each other as Jesus first loved them. And people on the outside looking in were amazed. These outsiders could see the love, and many of them wanted to become a part of this loving fellowship. (See, for example Acts 2:42-47.)

And the story of God’s love and salvation continues even today.

You see when the Bible says that the Word became flesh and dwelt among us it means first that God's Son was born into this world and lived among us. But, I believe it means more than that. The Word continues to be "fleshed out" by the actions of faithful disciples today. The Spirit of the risen Christ is still alive and active, and others see Jesus today in our love. Jesus still calls us to love one another as he has first loved us.

AFRAID TO LOVE

And yet we are afraid to love. We know that loving makes us vulnerable. We inherently know that when we love in a sense we too lay down our lives. And that makes us very fearful.

C.S. Lewis once wrote,

"To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything and your heart will certainly be wrung and possibly broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact, you must give your heart to no one, not even to an animal. Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements; lock it up safe in the casket ... of your selfishness.

But, in that casket ... safe, dark motionless, airless ... it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable ... The only place outside Heaven where you can be perfectly safe from the dangers of love ... is Hell."

Remember that line by Tennyson?

"Tis' better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all?"
Tennyson wrote those words because a dear friend had died. Though the death of that friend caused him great anguish, Tennyson still believed the joys of the time he had with his friend overshadowed his loss.

And so it is implied that Tennyson was willing to take a chance on love and friendship again. The joy of friendship was worth the burden of risking loss.

Those who would be disciples of Jesus must also take that same risk. Jesus bids us to love one another as he first loved us. Jesus bids us to sacrifice ourselves in the cause of love and friendship.

Jesus calls us to do this not because he wants to hurt us but because he knows that the road to true joy often follows the most difficult path.

The strength for this difficult journey comes from God's love as revealed in Jesus Christ. If we really believe that God loves us and Jesus is our friend, then we will view our life and a world in a much different light.

THE ONE JESUS LOVED

In John's gospel the disciple John is referred to as the "one Jesus loved."

If we could ask John, what is your primary identity in life? He wouldn't say, "I am a disciple, I am an apostle, or I am the author of one of the four gospels." He would say, 'I am the one Jesus loves.'

Philip Yancey wrote in his book, *What's So Amazing about Grace?*,

"Sociologists have a theory of the looking-glass self: you become what the most important person in your life (wife, father, boss, etc.) thinks you are.

How would my life change if I truly believed the Bible's astounding words about God's love for me, if I looked in the mirror and saw what God sees?"

That's a good question. How would we change if we could say the same thing? If we truly believed, "I am the one Jesus loves" how would our life be different?

Brennan Manning tells the story of an Irish priest who, on a walking tour of a rural parish, sees an old peasant kneeling by the side of the road, praying. Impressed, the priest said to the man, "You must be very close to God."

The peasant looked up from his prayers, thought for a moment, and then smiled, "Yes, he's very fond of me."

If you get nothing else out of the service today, I want you to get this very important truth. "God is very fond of you. You are someone Jesus loves. You have a friend in Jesus."

WHAT A FRIEND

No one knew this truth better than the hymn writer, Joseph Scriven. This morning we're going to sing this hymn that has been a favorite with many generations, "What a Friend We Have in Jesus." But, the circumstances under which those words were written make them even more meaningful.

Joseph did not have an easy life. When he was a young man in Ireland, his fiancée accidentally drowned the evening before their wedding. He was heartbroken and began to wander, hoping to forget his sorrow.

At age 25 he became a Christian, sold all his possessions, left Ireland and settled in Canada. In Canada Joseph again fell in love and was due to be married, but his second bride to be fell ill of pneumonia and died. But, the young man seemed destined to live his life alone.

Such tragedy might have caused many to give up their faith all together, but in Joseph's case the opposite was the true. Joseph devoted the rest of his life to helping others.

As a faithful member of the Plymouth Brethren Church, he took his faith very seriously, literally basing his life on the Sermon on the Mount. He spent much of his time doing odd jobs for widows and the sick. He often worked for no wages and was regarded by his community as a kind man, albeit a bit odd.

After living in Canada for a while there was more bad news. His mother in Ireland was gravely ill. Joseph had no material resources to send her, and he had no way to get back home. So he penned some words to remind her that the most perfect of friends, Jesus Himself was nearby.

In 1855 when Joseph was ill a friend came to visit and discovered the poem that he had written his mother many years before scribbled on a scratch pad. He had entitled it, "Pray without Ceasing." When the friend inquired about the poem's origins, Joseph replied, "The Lord and I did it together."

Joseph never meant for this poem to become a hymn, but it soon became very popular and was set to music in 1868 by Charles Converse. He is the one who gave it the title, "What a Friend We Have in Jesus."

Scriven died in 1886 (ironically by drowning). And in his memory, the town of Port Hope, Ontario erected a monument with this inscription from Scriven's famous song: In His arms He'll take and shield thee. Thou wilt find a solace there.

Like the life of Joseph Scriven our lives certainly won't be perfect. Our hearts will be broken many times, and we will be tempted to abandon our first love. But, today's lesson reminds us of this simple but powerful truth. Jesus is our friend. His love will never fail. No matter what happens in his arms we will find solace and hope for this life and the life to come.

I invite you this morning to put your trust in Him.