

**“Friends“**

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John 15:9-17

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.

**JESUS’ LAST WILL AND TESTAMENT**

These past few weeks we have been studying Jesus’ last words to his disciples. Some even refer to this section as Jesus’ last will and testament.

He would soon leave them and go to prepare a place for them in heaven. But, what could he say to them to encourage them and help them continue his ministry here on earth?

He applies a number of metaphors to himself that were used in the Old Testament to describe the providential care of God.

We've looked at these metaphors in previous sermons. And we've found that these ways of understanding God still have the power to bring us comfort today.

For example, Jesus said,  
"I am the Good Shepherd.  
I know my sheep and my sheep know me."

God knows us.  
God cares for us.  
The Lord is our Shepherd.

How many times has this image given comfort to families during their time of trial?

Last week we heard Jesus say,

"I am the Vine and you are the branches.  
If you want to live an abundant life, follow my commandments.  
Abide in my love."

The love of Jesus comes from God.  
And Jesus has revealed God's love to his disciples by the way he has loved them.

So, as the branches stick close to the vine so we are to stick close to the teachings of Jesus.

We are to abide in his lesson of love.  
Many of us know that when we stay close to the love of God as revealed in Jesus, we feel more fruitful.

Instead of our life being filled with powerless effort we find effortless power.

## THE MANDATE

The immediate context for all of these passages is the Last Supper, that Thursday before Good Friday when Jesus was crucified.

But, in John's gospel, it's not the symbolic meal that is emphasized.

It's what happens before the meal.

Jesus humbly washes his disciples' feet.

And He tells them that this is an example.

The disciples are charged to humbly serve each other in the same way.

This foot washing, this act of humble service was a symbol of God's love in Christ.

And it was a mandate. It was a command.

(By the way, that's what the Maunday Thursday service during Holy Week is all about.

The word Maunday means mandate. On that night we remember Jesus' mandate.

Disciples are to love one another as he had first loved them.)

This mandate is repeated many times in Jesus' farewell speech.

And in today's lesson we hear it again.

"Love one another as I have loved you."

## SACRIFICIAL FRIENDSHIP FOR SINNERS

But, now Jesus adds a new way to describe his love, friendship.

And his friendship is sacrificial.

Jesus is such a good friend

that he is even willing to lay down his life for those that he loves.

Of course we know that this will soon be the case.

Jesus will die on the cross.

He will literally lay down his life for his friends.

This is Jesus' definition of love and friendship.

But, this example of love and friendship is unique.  
It *not* based upon mutual affection.  
It's based upon God's gracious choice. (John 15:16)

We talked last week about why Jesus came into the world.

God didn't sent his Son into the world to condemn the world. God sent his Son into the world to redeem the world. (John 3:17)

And that means everyone, even sinners,  
even those who are unrighteous.

As the Apostle Paul put it in his letter to the Romans (5:6-8),

"Christ died for the ungodly."

Now Paul admits that there are cases where someone might actually die for a righteous person.

But, this is different.  
"God proves his love for us in that,  
while we still were sinners, Christ died for us."

This takes love and friendship to a whole new level.  
A level that none of us will ever achieve.

We may be willing to put our lives on the line for someone or something that we love.

But, to die for someone who is unrighteous?  
To die for someone who is a scoundrel?  
The chances are slim and none...and (as the saying goes) slim just left town.

## GRACE AND GRATITUDE

So, how can we possibly love like Jesus?  
How can we take up a cross and follow him?

How can we love others when some of those people are not so lovable?

In verse 14 Jesus tells the disciples,  
“You are my friends if you do what I command you.”

That makes friendship with God in Christ seem impossible.

No one can ever love as Jesus has loved us.

In fact, the Bible tells us that this is true.  
All of us have sinned and fall short of God’s glory (Romans 3:23).

We fall short.  
We’re not the people we should be.

But, here’s the key.  
Salvation does not depend upon what we choose to do or not do.

Salvation is based upon God’s gracious choice.

Jesus tells the disciples in verse 16,  
“You did not choose me but I chose you.”

This is a theme that runs throughout the Bible.  
We are saved by God’s gracious choice.  
In the Old Testament, God chooses a people for salvation as a sign of hope to the world.

And in the New Testament, the blessing comes to the whole world through the birth, life, death and resurrection of a Savior. In him we see that God’s chosen people are a much larger group than previously imagined.

God’s love does for us what we cannot do for ourselves.

Christ has called his disciples friends.  
And Christ has called us friends as well.  
Christ has revealed to us the very heart of God.

And what is the heart of God like?  
What is at the core of God’s being?

Love.

God is love the Bible tells us.  
Unconditional, life changing,  
new creation, mind blowing love.

This why we sing amazing grace.  
It is the song of those who have been chosen by God out of love.

So, what is the response to such amazing grace?  
Gratitude.

We follow the command of Jesus to love others out of gratitude.

We don't love others because they are so lovable.  
We love others because God in Christ first loved us.

We love others because we sing,  
"What a Friend We Have in Jesus".

## CAN'T MAKE FRIENDS WITH THE WORLD

They say you can tell a person's character by the friends they keep.

In Jesus' case that got him into trouble.  
The religious and political authorities accused Jesus  
of being a friend of tax collectors and sinners.

Jesus didn't deny that accusation.  
He simply said,

"Of course I'm hanging out with sinners.  
The physician has to help people who are sick.  
But, I'm afraid you have some of the same problems.  
You need a physician too."

That made the religious and political leaders mad.  
In fact that's why they eventually killed Jesus.

They bought into the notion that they could live the good life on their own.

They didn't need the friendship of God because they were friends with the world.

Oh, they cloaked their worldly friendship in religious terms.

But, they did not hesitate to call Caesar Lord and King if it suited their political purpose. (Before the crucifixion of Jesus the crowd shouted, "We have no king but Caesar!") Politics truly does make for some strange bedfellows.

This continues to be a temptation for us.

In the book of James we read this warning,

"Don't you know that friendship with the world moves you farther away from God?

Whoever wishes to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God."  
(James 4:4 paraphrased)

Now this doesn't mean that we are to abandon the world in favor of heaven. Remember, Jesus spent much of his ministry with sinners.

He left the glory of heaven in order to be a part of this world. He loved the world and sacrificed himself in order to save it.

But, there's one thing Jesus didn't do.  
He didn't adopt the ways of the world.

He didn't bow down to Satan and say that might makes right.

He didn't compromise with crooked politicians in order to achieve his goals.  
He didn't abandon compassion for the sake of religious dogma.

Remember this was the great temptation for Jesus,  
the temptation to forsake the way of the cross for the ways of the world.

And the temptation was real.  
In the Garden of Gethsemane, his anguish was on display.

But, in the end sacrificial love overcame the ways of the world.

He laid down his life for the sake of his friends.

And who are Jesus' friends?

All of us.

## GOD IS OUR FRIEND

The most important thing we do each week is to think about the nature of God.

Each week we ask: "What is God like?"

And the answer this week is:

God is our friend.

God is the kind of friend who would give us anything that we need.  
God is the kind of friend who would lay down his life for us out of love.

In the Old Testament very few could claim to be friends with God.  
Only the great heroes of the faith had that privilege.

Moses could make such a claim.

The Scripture says, "...the Lord used to speak to Moses face to face, as one speaks to a friend." (Exodus 33:11)

Abraham could make that claim.

The Bible tells us that he was also called the friend of God. (James 2:23)

But, everyone else was kept at a distance.

The glory of God was too much to bear.

The presence of God remained hidden behind the curtain of the Temple.

No one else could see God and live.

But, in our lesson for today this changes.

Jesus told his disciples,

"I do not call you servants any longer,

because the servant does not know what the master is doing;

...I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father.”

And you may remember that when Jesus died on the cross, the veil that separated the Holy of Holies from the rest of the Temple was torn from top to bottom.

With the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, God no longer was a stranger hidden behind the veil.

God was revealed to be our friend.  
And that changes everything...forever.

And that's one of the reasons we celebrate the Lord's Supper.

It's a sign of friendship.  
We also call it communion.  
We have mystic sweet communion with God, with the saints in glory, and with each other.

Since God in Christ has revealed Himself to be our friend, a friend who would even die for us out of love, we take this bread and drink this cup to remind ourselves of what is really important.

We do this in remembrance of him, of Jesus who has called us friends.

## SAYING GOODBYE TO FRIENDS

Today's lesson is a word of comfort.  
What a Friend We Have in Jesus.

But, it also records a sad time for the disciples.

Jesus was saying goodbye to his friends, and in many different ways he was trying to leave them something to hang on to while he was gone.

He promised that his Word and Spirit would be with them always.

And he reminded them that they had each other...that now out of gratitude they could love one another as he had first loved them.

In the nineteenth century, when friends moved away, the community would present them with a friendship quilt.

Each block of that quilt might be made by a different person.

Sometimes the block was signed by that particular friend.

And so this very practical and useful gift went with the travelers.

The love and names of friends could literally surround them with warmth as they made their way to their new home.

In my office I have many mementos of friends that I have had to leave.

Many have gone on to the church triumphant.  
But, their love and friendship remains.

And sometimes when I feel discouraged, I look at those plaques and pictures and smile.

It's about more than just a longing for the past.

It's a reminder that the friendship of God is expressed in very concrete down to earth ways in the lives of God's people.

And that friendship goes with us.  
That friendship enfolds us like a quilt every step of the way.

## THE SOCIETY OF FRIENDS

I saw a report this week that young people today are so lonely that it's even affecting their mental health. But, when I saw the statistics I noticed that every age group was suffering from the same problem.

What can the church bring to a lonely world?

I would suggest that the church can simply be a friend to those who need one.

Most of you know about a religious community called the Quakers.

That's what they're commonly called.

But, their official name is:  
"The Religious Society of Friends".

That name is based on John 15:15 when Jesus tells his disciples,

"I have called you friends."

I think they're on to something.  
Friendship is akin to godliness.

And being a friend may just be the most important thing that we do as disciples of Jesus.

So, today we take communion.

And we remember our greatest friend.  
The one who laid down his life for us so that we might be saved.

And again we sing,  
"What a friend we have in Jesus".

Amen.