

“The Sacred Value of Friendship”

Sunday, May 9, 2021

The Sixth Sunday of Easter

John 15:9-17

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Jesus calls the disciples to offer the sort of love he has offered through acts of selfless friendship which bear the fruit of God's love.

Let's set the scene: the hour is late. The entire event is taking much longer than anyone had planned, and the crowd is getting restless. Look closely and you'll find 12 men huddled near to each other who are all increasingly restless and anxious. They are clearly worried about what lies ahead. A guy named Peter has begun to sweat profusely, while another of the 12 seems to give up entirely, and throws up his hands in disgust while mumbling something about a betrayal and walks away. Meanwhile, another of the guys has given himself entirely to sarcasm: “Yeah, yeah, yeah,” he mutters, “it's always the same phrase over and over again: “abide in love,” “Love one another,” “my joy may be in you.’ Let's get this over with, ok?”

Now you might think that what I have just described is a creative, if a bit snarky, take on the scripture from John. But what I've actually described for you is the scene that is taking place right this very moment in the greeting card aisle at Walgreen's.

Mother's Day always presents a bit of a problem for preachers: how do you not mention Mother's Day, but then how do you draw a line that connects these scriptures to Mother's Day. Moreover, there are many women for whom this is not an easy day—for some it is a day of tremendous pain, grief, sorrow, regret, or even exclusion. We can talk about “love,” but the love printed on a greeting card seems commercialized and anemic compared to the love described by Jesus. Even Anna Jarvis, the woman who worked tirelessly in the 1920's and 30s to make Mother's Day an American holiday eventually tried to get it removed from the calendar because it had become over commercialized.

One mother, still recovering from a hysterectomy, wrote recently, that “if my church had done the “all mothers stand up thing” or distributed flowers, I don't think I would have made it through the service.”

We do not need to dissect that conversation too far to understand how Mother's Day is problematic for some.

But the problem is not Mother's Day. There is a larger problem for preachers and for congregations in the words Jesus speaks today: "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends."

At first blush what Jesus is saying makes perfect sense: we do cherish our friends. Many people would do just about anything for their friends. We know of stories of how friends have placed their lives on the line for each other. We are moved by these stories, and we would like to think that we would do just about anything for our friends.

Our friendships are indeed sacred because they are building blocks of community.

In elementary school, my friends were the other free-range kids in the neighborhood. Our mothers would turn us out in the morning like grazing cattle. Our adventures took us into the woods, across streets, in and out of neighbor's houses and back yards. We knew who our friends were, and we would do anything for them.

In high school, my friends were mostly from the band. And if you have ever been in band, you know that you pretty much had to stick up for each other because generally speaking you weren't at the top of social order! Our friends understood it when we said, "I've got band," or when we told them our weekends were booked, and our homework barely completed. We knew who our friends were.

A few years ago, I went back to a college reunion. After I walked into the banquet room, I just about turned around and left. Who were all these old people? But then I realized they were younger than me. They were my friends. And within minutes we were well on our way down memory lane. We knew who our friends were.

In seminary, I met a large group of friends, including my future wife, the first week of school. We all lived in the same dorm, had all the same classes, ate in the same building and studied in the same library. For fun a group of us would meet in someone's dorm room to watch the "Newlywed Game" together so we could practice our pastoral counseling skills. I wish I was making that up.

The point is: Jesus' words about love and friendship resonate with us. But what creates a problem for us is the realization that the concept of friendship Jesus holds sacred looks a bit different to the one we understand. And I believe that creates a big problem for you and for me. We attach certain values, emotions, and idea to love and friendship. And generally, we pick out our friend groups based on shared interests and values—that's how networks of friends develop.

We become cavalier about the ways we use the words "love" and "friendship," however, especially in a world driven by social media. In our social media-driven world, "friending" or "unfriending" a person is done with a click of a button, and rarely involves any sort of expression of commitment. We say, "Love is what makes a Subaru a Subaru." "You're going to love how you look." Share a Coke with someone you love. Tell me you love me."

As one Biblical scholar noted, "love can be used on the one hand to describe something as trivial as a French fry and on the other hand something as profound as a parent's care and concern for a child."¹

It's this juncture that makes things complicated for Christians. I think I can say with some confidence that when Jesus says, "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends," he does not then go on to say, "And how about this bread? Don't you just love this bread?"

Nor does he say, "Look at how many new friend requests I have had this week!"

Instead, Jesus sets forth a vision of friendship that runs against the grain of our cultural understanding of friendship. He speaks of vines and branches that are entwined and blended together, growing from a common source. He calls us friends because of the love and the life that we share in Him—and then he asks us to do for each other what he has done and is willing to do for us—to lay down our lives for each other.

This was a common understanding of friendship in Jesus' day, though scholars suggest that there were probably not any more persons willing to lay down their entire lives for their friends then than there is today. But here Jesus takes a

¹ Michael J. Chan, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/dear-working-preacher/rethinking-love>

commonly accepted understanding of friendship and reframes it in light of the life he has lived among us.

Jesus becomes the embodiment of this sort of friendship. He has, in fact, shown us repeatedly how his life will be poured out in love and service to others. John has taken care to show Jesus as the presence of God in the world—not just among those with whom he shared common identity, but with people who were different—Samaritans, women, people with illness. This is the God who is with us and who loves the whole world. Even on the last day of his life, Gail O'Day reminds us, Jesus carries the cross by himself in John's Gospel. Where the other Gospels Simon of Cyrene is mentioned as helping Jesus, in John's Gospel the point is made that Jesus is laying down his life of his own accord. He chooses the ultimate act of friendship.

And it is to that sort of embodied presence in the world that Jesus calls us.

As we all know, the pandemic has stretched and reshaped the ideas of community, friendship, and being with one another. A recent survey in a local school district has revealed the devastation this has created among students. The survey showed a rolling cycle of anxiety, depression, loss, and isolation among students. Respondents talked about loss of family members, loss of social interaction, loss of jobs and everything else we have come to associate with the pandemic.

But it also revealed a slender thread of possibility. There have been instances where hope has interrupted these cycles. There are places where resilience has emerged. There have been examples of friends, of community groups and others laying down their lives.

This is the work which Jesus calls on us to continue.

You remember the story of the people of Le Chambon in France. This village of Reformed Protestants embraced thousands of Jewish refugees, many of them children, during World War II. They hid them in their homes, provided food for them, and preserved their lives. Andre Trocme, the pastor, would end his sermons each week by saying You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your mind and with all your strength and love your neighbor as yourself.

Go practice it.” Etched into the stone archway of the church’s entrance are the words, “Aimez-vous les uns les autres.” Love one another.

John Calvin, who was a refugee and outsider in Geneva, took great pains to instruct the church in Geneva to extend love without regard to social status or religious identity. He wrote, “we ought to treat like brothers and sisters and count as believers those we think unworthy of the fellowship of the godly.” We too often forget that Calvin was intent on bridging gaps between people.

The quintessential act for Christians is to cross boundaries—to lay down our lives—in acts of friendship. Love is no abstract concept, but is rather embedded in our willingness to serve and care for our neighbors as ourselves.

This is not easy. We live in a time when friendships are often made based on commonalities and mutual interests. We are grouped and segregated into like minded colonies of friends. But the love and friendship Christ made sacred pushes across lines of division. It is a love grounded in humility and the awareness that true joy comes from relationships of mutuality and respect.

It is a love grounded in the one who says to us, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your mind and with all your strength, and love your neighbor as yourself.” Now, go practice it. Amen.