

A Sermon
Rev. W. Kevin Holder
Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
November 25, 2018

A Friendly Church

John 15:9-17

Last Sunday I preached about your relatives. Not just your relatives by birth, but most of all your relatives by new birth through Christ. While thanking God for our biological families, we thank him above all for the family of God, the relatives Jesus has called and assembled, so that individually and together, we can do the will of God. As I stressed in last Sunday's message, from a Christian perspective, and in light of the significance of baptism, we can affirm that water is thicker than blood.

So having spent some quality time this week with folks who are connected to you genetically, you've come back here today to spend time with people who are your kin through Jesus. And this morning, I want us to shift the focus from family to friendship. Though the Scriptures often use family as an image for the life of God's people, they sometimes speak of our relationship to God and to one another in terms of friendship.

Jesus does so in this morning's reading from the Gospel of John. Our text is part Jesus' farewell discourse with his disciples. Our Lord is preparing his disciples for his death and their own persecution. He tells them that because of their union with him, they'll face hardships. But he also comforts and reassures them with the promise that the Spirit will come to them, to guide them and help them and teach them.

As they follow Jesus in the midst of opposition and troubles, Jesus' community of disciples is supposed to "bear fruit" (15:1-8). Bearing fruit means doing works of love, the tangible sign that they belong to Jesus. John, the writer of the fourth Gospel, was known in the ancient church for his concern for love. One of the early church fathers, Jerome, tells how John, in his extreme old age, as he was carried into the assembly, would say, "Little children, love one another." When the disciples got tired of this, they asked, "Master, why do you always say this?" John answered, "It is the Lord's command. If this be done, it is enough."¹

But we're not capable of doing this, in and of ourselves. That's why Jesus says that our love has to be generated by our bond with him, just as his love is generated by his bond with the Father. In other words, the love that God and Jesus share with each other is supposed to be enacted in the community of Jesus' followers. This love isn't something that we try to muster up on our own. It's fruit. It's something that comes forth naturally from relationship with Jesus. And one of the ways Jesus describes this relationship is with the language of friendship.

At some point during the next few weeks, some of you will be watching the holiday classic, "It's a Wonderful Life." On Christmas Eve, George Bailey, played by Jimmy Stewart, is on the verge of suicide, when his guardian angel Clarence intervenes. Clarence shows George all the lives he has touched, and helps him see how different life in his community would have been if he had never been born. In the film's closing scene, George runs back home, anticipating that he'll be arrested regarding some lost money, only to find that his wife and uncle have rallied the townspeople, who have donated more than enough to cover the missing money. On top of the pile of donations is a copy of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, with an inscription from Clarence, quoting Mark Twain. It says, "Dear George: Remember no

man is a failure who has friends!" That wasn't the only thing Mark Twain said about friendship. He also once noted, "The holy passion of friendship is of so sweet and steady and loyal and enduring a nature that it will last through a whole lifetime if not asked to lend money!"²

As you can tell, when it comes to friendship, definitions vary. It can be a confusing thing to describe. Ronald Sharp, who teaches a course on the literature of friendship, says, "It's not about what someone can do for you, it's who and what the two of you become in each other's presence The notion of doing nothing but spending time in each other's company has, in a way, become a lost art. People are so eager to maximize efficiency of relationships that they have lost touch with what it is to be a friend."³

Technology, though it can certainly help, doesn't have all the answers either. Professor Sherry Turkle tells about a conversation she had years ago with a 16-year-old girl who was considering the idea of having a computer companion in the future. According to Turkle:

It's not that the robot she'd imagined, a vastly more sophisticated Siri, was so inspiring. It's that she'd already found people to be so disappointing. And now, for the first time, she explained to me, people have *options*. Back then I thought her comments seemed prescient. Now I find them timely.

"There are people who have tried to make friends, but stumbled so badly that they've given up," she said. "So when they hear this idea of robots as companions, well . . . it's not like a robot has the mind to walk away or leave you or anything like that."⁴

Turkle adds that it's true, robots may not be able to break your heart, but they're also incapable of the kind of human love and intimacy that we need in our lives.

Friendship is above all a gift of God. We can all think of individuals with whom we have exchanged and shared this gift. People with whom you have formed a bond characterized by trust and transparency. True, there are different kinds of friendships and different levels of friendship. But they all, in some way or another, require the investment of time and attentiveness, and in many cases long-term devotion. In other words, friendship takes work. It doesn't just happen. You have to be intentional about it and willing to cultivate it.

There are some cases where our definitions of friendship are much broader and looser. What, for instance, actually constitutes "friendship" on social media? We're now in an environment where to "friend" someone has become a verb. True, a Facebook "friend" can be someone you keep in touch with on a regular basis. Someone you hang out with and share with. You may even talk to them by phone or engage with them face to face. But at the same time, some Facebook "friends" can be near strangers, individuals you may have never actually met or interacted with other than requesting that they be added to your network. Plus, if the connection or relationship doesn't look very promising, or is maybe even downright dangerous, you can always "unfriend" the person. All this to say that in cyberspace, the beginning, or the end, of a "friendship" can be a matter of just one click of the mouse.

In today's text, some of the disciples, for the sake of efficiency, had suggested that Jesus just skype them. But he said no, the timing and the subject matter called for something much more intimate. "I no longer call you servants," says Jesus, "because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends. . ." (v. 15). The word translated as "friend" is from the verb "to love." Our use of the word "friend" doesn't always convey the presence of love that infuses the idea of friendship in John's Gospel. Here in our text, friendship has an extra depth to it. When Jesus speaks of friends, he's really saying "those who are loved." Loved by himself, which also means loved by God. It means being drawn into the intimacy and oneness of the relationship that Jesus the Son shares with God the Father. Being a friend of Jesus means being a friend of God.

And with this friendship comes knowledge. God knowing you and you knowing God. Now that doesn't mean understanding all the mysteries of God and his ways in the world. When Jesus says, "Everything I that learned from my Father I have made known to you," he's not saying that all the divine secrets have now been unveiled. But he is saying that there's something about friendship and love that removes barriers. We know this in our own experience with friends. Friends disclose themselves to one another. They don't hide behind emotional walls. They open up to and welcome one another. They reveal who they are. They share secrets. They deal with one another honestly and transparently. If there's something that interferes with, hinders, or gets in the way of a right and flourishing relationship, friends address it and remove it. Whatever needs to be done gets done in order to preserve and perpetuate the relationship.

Jesus is God's way of restoring us to friendship with himself. Through Jesus, God discloses himself to us in a full and decisive way. Christmas may still be a month away, but we're always affirming that "the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us" (1:14a). "No one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only, who is at the Father's side, has made him known" (1:18). So God refuses to be a stranger to us, or to have us be separated and estranged from him. Instead, through Jesus, God deals with us in forgiveness, and "takes away the sin of the world" (1:29). In other words, God comes near to us in mercy, opens his heart up to us, and what we see is a heart of love.

Not just love in the sense of a vague benevolence or a grudging accessibility, but a deep and redeeming love that takes the initiative to come to us in our lostness and darkness. "You did not choose me, but I chose you," says Jesus (v. 16a). You see, friendship with God starts on God's side, not our side. And what starts with God is no easy love. It's costly love, love that involves Jesus' path to death. "Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends" (v. 13). Jesus' once and for all gift of himself on the cross then gets enacted and embodied in the ways that we give ourselves away to each other, not only within the community of his disciples but outwardly toward the larger world. This is how we, and the world, will know that we are Jesus' friends, God's friends.

When you're friends with someone, you take seriously what they take seriously. And one of the best ways to tell what Jesus takes seriously is to listen to what he commands. "If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father's commands and remain in his love. . . . My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you" (vv. 10 and 12). This means that our love for one another is measured by Jesus' love for us. And what kind of love is Jesus' love? Not a love that only reaches out once it's deserved, or a love that's only extended to those who are lovable. Rather, a love that takes the initiative, taking those who are alienated and turning them into friends.

People who are loved by Jesus in this way, and who love in the way of Jesus, are called the church. Like every other congregation, ours is a real, human community whose purpose is to remain in Jesus' love. To be his friends and to display this friendship to the world. That's what it means to be a friendly church. Yes, that includes welcoming others with a smile and relating to them with warmth and care. But above all, it means giving our lives away to each other. It means treating one another as people for whom Jesus laid down his life. People whom Jesus is eager to call friends.

¹ Jerome, *Commentary on Galatians* at Gal. 6:10.

² David E. Leininger, "Jesus' Friend," a sermon delivered on May 4, 1997 at First Presbyterian Church, Warren, Pennsylvania.

³ Kate Murphy, "Do Your Friends Really Like You?" *The New York Times* (August 6, 2016).

⁴ Sherry Turkle, "There Will Never Be an Age of Artificial Intimacy," *The New York Times* (August 11, 2018).