

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
May 5, 2024

What a Friend

John 15:11-17

You may have noticed that today's text from John is the continuation of last Sunday's Scripture, in which Jesus uses vine and branch imagery to describe the unity and mutuality that love makes possible. Jesus is in the midst of his Farewell Discourse, preparing his disciples for his return to the Father and their ongoing life and mission without his physical presence. He tells them to remain in his love by obeying his commands, the most basic of which is to love each other.

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.

"Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends" (v. 13). In the ancient world, the ideal of friendship was an important and popular topic. There were various kinds of friendship. Some were political friendships. Some were patron-client friendships. Some were professional friendships. Some were groupings based on people of the same gender and age. Ideals of friendship included a strong emphasis on loyalty, intimacy and shared confidences, as well as the sharing of resources. So when Jesus speaks of his disciples as his "friends," he's speaking into a cultural context where friendship has a range of meanings and practices associated with it.

In our text, Jesus spells out his definition of friendship. For him, friendship with his disciples is grounded in laying down his life for them out of love, which entails laying down their lives for one another. If they obey what he commands, that's what they'll do. Then Jesus takes things further by emphasizing the contrast between friends and servants. In that historical context, the master-slave relationship was very hierarchical, with the slave having no access to the master's business or goods. But that's not the kind of relationship Jesus intends or wants with his disciples. Instead, they're his friends.

"Everything that I learned from my Father," says Jesus, "I have made known to you" (v. 15). Friendship between Jesus and his disciples means intimacy, sharing, and transparency. He has kept nothing about God from them. The love of God isn't designed to be a divine mystery, hidden from a world that desperately needs it. No, Jesus has made it known to them, and now the time is drawing close for him to reveal the full extent of his love in his death for them. His self-giving on the cross is what defines his disciples. They're people

who are loved by Jesus, and, as he goes on to stress, people who are chosen by Jesus. "You did not choose me, but I chose you," says our Lord. So we're not friends of Jesus because he and we somehow found each other and made a connection. We're friends of Jesus because of his initiative. No matter how long any of us have known the Lord and followed his path in our lives, we need to be reminded of how this whole relationship started, by his grace. As one preacher has put it, "We received something we did not create, go searching for, or earn on our own. It resembles the glorious feeling of being asked to be someone's spouse, best friend, beloved."²

Of course, for the relationship to deepen and grow, there needs to be reciprocity. As Jesus emphasizes, we need to remain in him, stay in relationship with him. This is part of his remaining in us. Our responsiveness to his initiative, his grace, helps constitute the relationship. Remember that in order to bear fruit, the branch has to stay connected to the vine. One-sided friendship makes for very poor disciples. If the relationship is all Jesus and no you, the friendship doesn't get formed.

Several years ago, *The New York Times* featured an article exploring confusion about defining friendship. Even many experts who research the subject have trouble coming to agreement on how to describe it. One professor who teaches a course on the literature of friendship captured it this way: "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

One bishop tells about visiting a pastor who had served in his congregation for many, many years. As they wound up an intimate and lengthy chat, the bishop leaned forward and asked the pastor, "What is the summation, the bottom line of your long life of over 60 years of ministry?" He paused thoughtfully and said, "The satisfaction of doing God's will and enjoying fellowship with Jesus in doing it."⁴

Fellowship with Jesus across time. That's how the bond of love gets formed and strengthened. Friendship takes time. Just as we saw last week with Jesus' teaching about the vine and the branches, results aren't instantaneous. Pastor Michael Woodruff tells about an experience that provided him a lesson on friendship. He says:

I first realized how narrowly most Americans view friendships when I was traveling with a Brazilian leader. He'd started a thriving seminary, planted a church, written books—the man makes things happen. As we were driving from one meeting to another, I said, "Hey, do you want a cup of coffee?"

He said, "Really? We have time? Wow. I'm honored. That would be great."

I'm thinking, *I don't know why he's so thrilled*. I quickly pull into a drive-through coffee stand, and he says, "Ugh, you Americans. I feel so sorry for you. I thought you were asking to be my friend. I thought we were going to sit together and share life."⁵

Remaining in Jesus and having him remain in you isn't something that happens in a single moment. It requires being present to him as he is present to you, day in and day out, across time. This is part of what Jesus emphasizes in his Farewell Discourse, as he promises the Holy Spirit. The Spirit, he says, will guide his disciples into further truth about him, enabling them to hear Jesus' words, commands, and teachings in new settings under changing circumstances. Jesus says the Spirit "will take from what is mine and make it known to you" (16:15). Again, the stress is on Jesus not being concealed but rather revealed. In other words, the identity of God isn't a secret to be kept between the Father

and the Son. God wills to be known as one who loves and saves. So Jesus promises to be present to his disciples, then and now. That way we won't be in the dark about who God is and what God wants us to be in our lives.

What God wants is for us to receive and embody his reconciling love disclosed in Jesus. God wills that our relationship with him not just be a matter of he up there and we down here. No, as John announced at the beginning of his Gospel, "the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us" (1:14). God took on human form and came into the world to save us and to be with us, to have us be his people. He did that through the Son, who has always been so close to the Father, and wants to bring us into that closeness. That's why Jesus calls us his friends. True, he is, and always will be, Lord of all. But he's a Lord who comes nearer than we often recognize or believe. A Lord who calls us his "friends."

This doesn't mean that in Jesus, every secret about God, every mystery about his purposes, and every answer to our enduring questions, is now unveiled. But it does mean that what we need to know, and believe, in order to be loved and saved, to be children of God, has been disclosed. That which most makes God who God is—love—has been intimately shared with us, so that in receiving his forgiveness, you can be made into his likeness, practicing his reconciling love in the community of disciples and in the larger world.

As the old hymn says, "What a friend we have in Jesus." But it's not just friendship for the sake of friendship. It's friendship for the sake of fruit. At the end of today's text, Jesus says, "I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit—fruit that will last" (v. 16a). We know from last week's message that this fruit is love itself, demonstrated both within the church and beyond the church. So Jesus commissions us. He appoints us to lay down our lives for one another. And as we embrace our identity as Jesus' friends, his gift of himself on the cross takes shape in us.

The outcome, he says, isn't just fruit, but "fruit that will last." We know from experience that some fruit doesn't last. Poet and essayist John Leax has written about the vulnerability of a harvest. He says:

My garden has taught me to think ahead. For it to be fruitful, I must plan. I must build soil, plant, and nurture what I have planted. It has also taught me to hold the harvest lightly. Over the course of a season I can lose a crop to spring rains that rot the seed, slugs that eat new shoots, rabbits that eat everything, hail that breaks the strong, and drought that withers the weak. I can lose a crop because of my ignorance or my carelessness. Until I have the fruit in storage, where it can also spoil, I live with uncertainty. I do my best, work faithfully, and hope.⁶

Jesus knew that fruitfulness wouldn't just happen. He prepared his disciples for what was coming, not only in his suffering and death, but beyond. We ourselves are part of that beyond. And in his faithful work, Jesus continues to be with us and to speak to us, calling us his friends and commissioning us to be fruitful, yielding in our lives something that won't rot or perish or get tossed out. This kind of fruit—genuine, Christ-empowered, self-giving love—is fruit that will last.

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

² Susan Hedahl, *Commentary on John 15:9-17*. Working Preacher. May 17, 2009. <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/sixth-sunday-of-easter-2/commentary-on-john-159-17-2>. May 1, 2024.

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

⁴ L. Bevel Jones, "Faith, Friendship, and Fruitfulness." Day 1. May 25, 2003. https://day1.org/weekly-broadcast/5d9b820ef71918cdf200244a/faith_friendship_and_fruitfulness. May 1, 2024.

⁵ Michael Woodruff, from the sermon, "You Were Created to Connect." *PreachingToday.com*.

⁶ John Leax, in *In Season and Out*. *Christianity Today*, Vol. 35, No. 1.