

Friends of Jesus
John 15:9-17
May 9, 2021

We are moving into commencement season. This year high school and college seniors are especially anxious to be done with online and hybrid learning. Graduation speakers are preparing speeches to inspire graduates to overcome the challenges left in the wake of a global pandemic. These graduates are in great need of an infusion of hope for they embark upon their futures with great uncertainty, yet rich in promise.

Jesus has been mentoring his disciples for three years. He is preparing them for his departure and launching them to be his ambassadors in the world and in the future. He leaves them with parting words to inspire and guide.

Jesus offers his disciples a significant promotion. He says, "I do not call you servants any longer,....but I have called you friends." He bestows upon them the honor of friendship.

Consider the difference between servants and friends. A servant follows the orders of the master; she does the job for someone else who makes the decisions, carries the responsibility, and runs the show. A servant is in an inferior role without ownership, investment, or sometimes emotional involvement in their work. It is a job to be done. When the time is up, the employee clocks out and goes home without worrying about the quality of the work or whether it is complete.

On the other hand, a friendship is a relationship. A friend makes an investment of time, energy, commitment, and compassion. When there is a need, they get involved, responding with caring concern. They want what is best for the other person, and they devote themselves to making it happen. There is no time clock, no overtime pay required, and irregular hours are the norm.

Jesus promotes his disciples to friends. He doesn't want employees who punch in and out without investment. He wants people who will work with him – companions, colleagues, partners, who will adopt his ministry as their own. He wants friends who will love him and his large flock and bear their burdens with them. In the Greek the word for friend, *philia*, also means love. To be a friend is to love.

As contemporary disciples of Jesus, we are invited into friendship, which is both an honor and a responsibility. It does not mean that we are entitled to anything we want. It means that we are channels of Jesus' love. The love we

receive from Jesus is the love we share with others. When we give ourselves to one another in love, we discover a fulfilling joy that is found in no other way.

In this farewell address, Jesus names some hallmarks of friendship. First, he says, "Remain in my love." Abide or dwell in Jesus' love, for it is the source of our love for ourselves and for others. We can't love like Jesus loves if we do not continue receiving of his love for us. We need to have our roots deeply planted in the soil of God's love to bear the fruit of love. Without love, we are noisy gongs or clashing cymbals.

I like to imagine God's love as an immense ocean of clean, refreshing water. I need to drink regularly of that water to sustain my soul. I need to bathe in God's love and be clothed with it that I might love others. Without that love, I can turn sour, bitter, cynical or judgmental.

Remaining in God's love requires intentionality. We dip in that ocean of love through worship, daily prayer and devotion, small groups for spiritual formation, and service. Falling in love is easy; remaining in love is hard work. We need to nurture our relationship with God to keep it alive and vital. For from this holy friendship flows our love for one another.

That is the second hallmark of friendship with Jesus: love for one another, even to the extent of giving up one's life for another. Soon after this teaching, Jesus will literally lay down his life on the cross for his friends. Throughout his ministry, Jesus has shown that love is not a feeling; love is a verb. It is a conscious decision to work for the good of others. It is a decision to give of oneself, one's time, attention, and affection. We forego ourselves, abandon our prejudices and preferences, and offer support to another.

This past year we have seen and experienced how health professionals, teachers, utility workers, grocers and food service personnel, farmers and farm workers have placed their lives in danger in order to serve their fellow human beings in love. I saw a story about two traveling nurses who have accepted assignments out of state far from their own families in order to serve their neighbors in need in hospitals and at vaccination sites.

One of my cousin's grandchildren has a kidney disease. Rohan, age 12, has been hospitalized numerous times. Early this year it was determined that he was eligible for a kidney transplant. Last week I learned that his aunt's partner is a match and will be donating one of her kidneys to her nephew later this month! Another example of how someone is laying down her life for another.

The truth is that the acts of sacrificial love for most Christians in our country are rarely a matter of life or death. Fred Craddock said, "We think giving our all to

the Lord is like taking a \$1,000 bill and laying it on the table – ‘Here’s my lfie, Lord, I’m giving it all.’

“But the reality for most of us is that God sends us to the bank and has us cash in the \$1,000 for quarters. We go through life putting out 25 cents here and 50 cents there....Usually giving our life to Christ isn’t glorious. It’s done in all those little acts of love, 25 cents at a time.”ⁱ And each of those 25 cent acts of love is precious.

Friends of Jesus lay down their lives for others, a quarter at a time, and they do it with and for love.

A third hallmark of friendship with Jesus is producing lasting fruit. It means making an imprint on the heart of another, such that they know they are loved, not just with divine love. Henri Nouwen wrote, “The mystery of ministry is that we have been chosen to make our own limited and very conditional love the gateway for the unlimited and unconditional love of God.”ⁱⁱ Through our somewhat faulty love, we point people to the love of God.

In the 1860’s Ann Reeves Jarvis organized women’s clubs to serve suffering mothers and children. She lived in the coal mining section of what is now West Virginia. She saw the needs of women and children and the effect of the economy on these whom she served. Through mothers clubs she offered education about nutrition, sanitation, and hydration for fevered babies. When the Civil War began, Ann recruited nurses for military hospitals. After the war, the women’s clubs helped promote reconciliation between the North and South. She was convinced that women, especially mothers, had to work for peace because they could see the ravages of war in their husbands and sons. That was the genesis of what we know today as Mother’s Day.

Ann Jarvis’ daughter, Anna, started Mother’s Day at St. George’s Methodist Episcopal Church in Philadelphia. She envisioned it as a day to honor the sacrifices mothers make for their children. She suggested writing personal letters to mothers, sending an inexpensive carnation, and taking time to visit or attend church together.ⁱⁱⁱ

The original women’s clubs started by Ann Reeves Jarvis were means of meeting the needs of those most vulnerable and pointing them toward the love of God. Her actions bore the fruit of love that changed many lives through the healing power of love.

Friends of Jesus invest themselves in Jesus’ ministry of love. They do so by remaining in God’s love through spiritual practices. They love one another with

one small act of love at a time. They bear fruit by recognizing needs and seeking ways to meet those needs.

Having been loved by God, how are we sharing that love with one another? Today who needs a small act of love that they might know their value in your eyes and in God's? As those chosen to be friends of Jesus, may we cherish the privilege of practicing love as Jesus loves us.

ⁱ Fred Craddock, *New Interpreter's Bible, Vol. VIII*, Nashville: Abingdon, 1995, p. 629.

ⁱⁱ Henri Nouwen, *In the Name of Jesus: Reflections on Christian Leadership* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1989).

ⁱⁱⁱ "The Founding Mothers of Mother's Day," United Methodist Communications, March, 2015, <http://www.umc.org/news-and-media/methodist-history-the-founding-mothers-of-mothers-day>

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