

SERMON: What a Friend

TEXT: John 15:9-17

It was about 25 years ago when I was in seminary taking the required course on Pastoral Care. This class involved doing visitations, usually in a hospital or nursing home, and then writing a verbatim of the visit and sharing it with others in the class. A verbatim includes not only the conversation that took place with the one being visited, but also the observations and feelings of the one doing the visit.

As my very first verbatim was being evaluated by my classmates, one man took his turn to share his thoughts about what I had written. "I'm sure Ellen has friends," he began. Then he proceeded to rip me to shreds regarding what I wrote. Mind you, I was not acquainted with this person. We had never met until we had this class together. But, fortunately for me, he was willing to give me the benefit of the doubt – I guess as a way to soften the blow that was coming. "I'm sure Ellen has friends."

I was dumbfounded, and – as usual – wasn't able to defend myself or think of any clever retorts until the class had ended and I was back among my friends! Furthermore, none of my other classmates defended me either. Perhaps they were dumbfounded as well, wondering at the unfounded brutality of his words.

A couple of my closest friends had the idea to print t-shirts with the words, “I am Ellen’s friend,” so that everyone would know the truth.

I think it is safe to say that everyone has a friend – even if only a furry friend. I certainly hope that is true. And sometimes we feel closer to our friends than those in our own family. An ancient Athenian playwright named Euripides wrote, “One loyal friend is worth ten thousand relatives.” American gossip journalist, Walter Winchell wrote, “A real friend is one who walks in when the rest of the world walks out.” And the great Catholic theologian, Thomas Aquinas said, “There is nothing on this earth more to be prized than true friendship.”

<https://www.brainyquote.com>

And when we hear the words, WHAT A FRIEND, most of us could finish the sentence: What a friend *we have in Jesus*. If you’ve grown up in the Christian faith, you’ve probably experienced the friendship of Jesus, and you know it to be true. You know that Jesus called his followers friends.

From the Gospel of John, we heard the words of Jesus: “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. 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.”

One commentary explained Jesus’ clarification of how he regards his disciples. “They are not strangers, nor merely disciples, and certainly not just servants: they are friends. Jesus notes the reason he calls them ‘friends’ is he has shared the riches of all he has with them, in terms of his relationship with God. ‘I have made known to you everything...’ Here, Jesus’ offer of the intimacy of friendship is overwhelming. To appropriate Jesus the Risen Lord is to be invited into friendship with God. Friends of God. The reality of friendship with Jesus offers... *transparency*. To know the Risen Christ is to know the heart of God.”

(Susan Hedahl, www.workingpreacher.org, May 17, 2009)

While we all want Jesus to be our friend, and we sing about *What a Friend We Have in Jesus*, perhaps we should also consider what it means for us to *be a friend* to Jesus.

“Love each other as I have loved you,” he said. Be willing to lay down your life for your friends. But, not just your friends. Not just the people you’re naturally attracted to. Not just the people you enjoy spending time with. Not just

the people who speak your language, who can finish your sentences, who think the same way you do, who share similar experiences. Not just the people who feel love for you. No. Not just your friends. But everyone whom Jesus would choose as a friend. Everyone with whom Jesus would share a meal. Everyone whom Jesus would forgive. Everyone for whom Jesus would lay down his life.

This is what he meant when he said to obey his commands, to go and bear fruit: to love one another and to treat each person you meet as your friend.

Let's remember that Jesus could have allowed himself to be placed on a throne and worshipped like a king. That's what people wanted. But Jesus didn't want that. "I no longer call you servants," he said. "Instead, I have called you friends." Yet, he still says that we are his friends IF we do what he commands. And what he commands is that we love one another. That we befriend his friends.

All those people who have fled Central America and arrived at our border looking for asylum are afraid. Their homeland has become violent and unsafe. They are searching for a safe place to live. There is no easy solution; there are thousands of these people. I'm sure many of them are honest and hardworking; others not so much. I personally don't believe they are a threat to our national

security. But this many people? Where will they go? Who will take care of them? Perhaps it is not economically responsible to let them in. But Jesus didn't say anything about treating others with economic responsibility. Jesus would call them friends. Jesus laid down his life for them. It seems to me that any friend of Jesus ought to be a friend of ours. How do you turn away a friend who needs a safe place?

I've been learning the past couple of years about something called toxic charity. Toxic charity is when we help others not to serve their needs but to fill our own needs to feel good. Too often we convince ourselves that we know what is best for others, without consulting them, without even getting to know them. The problem with this is that it keeps us – as helpers – in a position of authority over those we help. And it keeps them in a position of dependence and continuing neediness; it keeps them lower than us.

I think this is why the Presbyterian Church (USA) a number of years ago, stopped using the term *missionary* and replaced it with *mission co-worker*. A co-worker is one who works alongside the population she serves, who emphasizes and establishes a more equal relationship, a mutual partnership without the power

dynamic. Mission co-workers are not just teaching, but learning; not just talking, but listening; not just giving, but receiving.

Here's another memorable adage about friends: "Don't walk behind me; I may not lead. Do not walk in front me; I may not follow. Walk beside me and be my friend."

"I no longer call you servants, but friends," Jesus said. Jesus asks us to love one another as friends. Friends who desire to know and be known. Friends who want to support and be supported. Friends who are willing to sacrifice for one another. Friends who don't just feed the poor, but invite everyone to the table and share a meal together.

As we share the meal of the Lord's Supper and take in the body and blood of our Lord, may we become more like him. May we be inspired and strengthened by him. May we grow in faith and love. And may we learn to welcome every person as a friend...to the glory of God!

AMEN.